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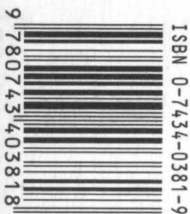


BOOK III OF III
MAELSTROM

AUSTEN ANDREWS



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EAN

1

The roiling smoke pulled away from Montenegro in pale, wispy strands.

He materialized from the haze like a phantom astride his black, mechanical warhorse. The automaton's wings tilted backward, its serpentine tail lashing the air. The knight glowered through his crested helmet. His dark armor glinted at distant flashes of lightning. With slow precision he aimed his barbed lance and nudged the clockwork steed forward.

The mounted general startled at the outlandish vision before him. Quickly his expression turned to rage as he snapped down the visor of his great helm and took up his own lance. Sorcerous enchantments glittered across his silvery plate mail. His tall, white horse stomped anxiously. When he lunged into a charge, Montenegro engaged his machine to gallop. Sparks crashed from iron hooves. The two men hurtled toward one another and the smoke-plumed battlefield seemed to dissolve around them.

In his mind Montenegro cried, *Grandfather, I do this for Honor!*

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the distinguished from the page like a phenomenon outside his
world mechanical weather. The anonymous's wings tilted
forward, its propeller and behind the air the knight
advanced through his crystal helmet the dark armor
shining, some flashes of lightning. With slow precision he
moved and pushed back and pushed the shadowy need for

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POCKET BOOKS

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For my parents and grandparents and everyone
who came before me; for my children,
nephew and nieces who came after me;
and for Elizabeth, who stood beside me
during the long, long War.

For my parents and grandparents and everyone
who came before me, for my children
nephews and nieces who came after me
and for Elizabeth, who stood beside me
during the long long war

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sosaria as it appears in *The Technocrat War* is the synthesis of many extraordinary talents. Armand de Orive, Andy Hoyos, Starr Long, Damion Schubert, and the entire team on the Origin project deserve credit for dreaming the world in which I am privileged to write.

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I wish to express my appreciation to the many individuals who have assisted me in the completion of this work. In particular, I am indebted to the following:

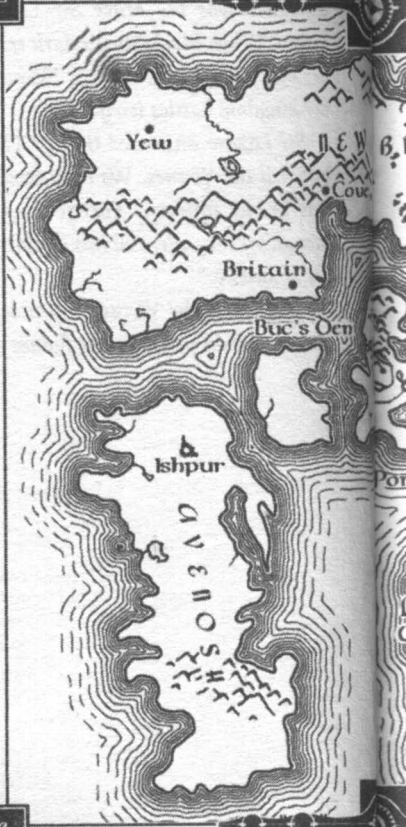
My first and most important debt is to my father, Mr. J. H. [Name], who has been a constant source of inspiration and encouragement throughout my life. I am also indebted to my mother, Mrs. [Name], for her unwavering support and love. To my friends, especially [Name], [Name], and [Name], for their helpful criticism and suggestions. Finally, to the many teachers who have helped me along my way.

Respectfully,
[Signature]

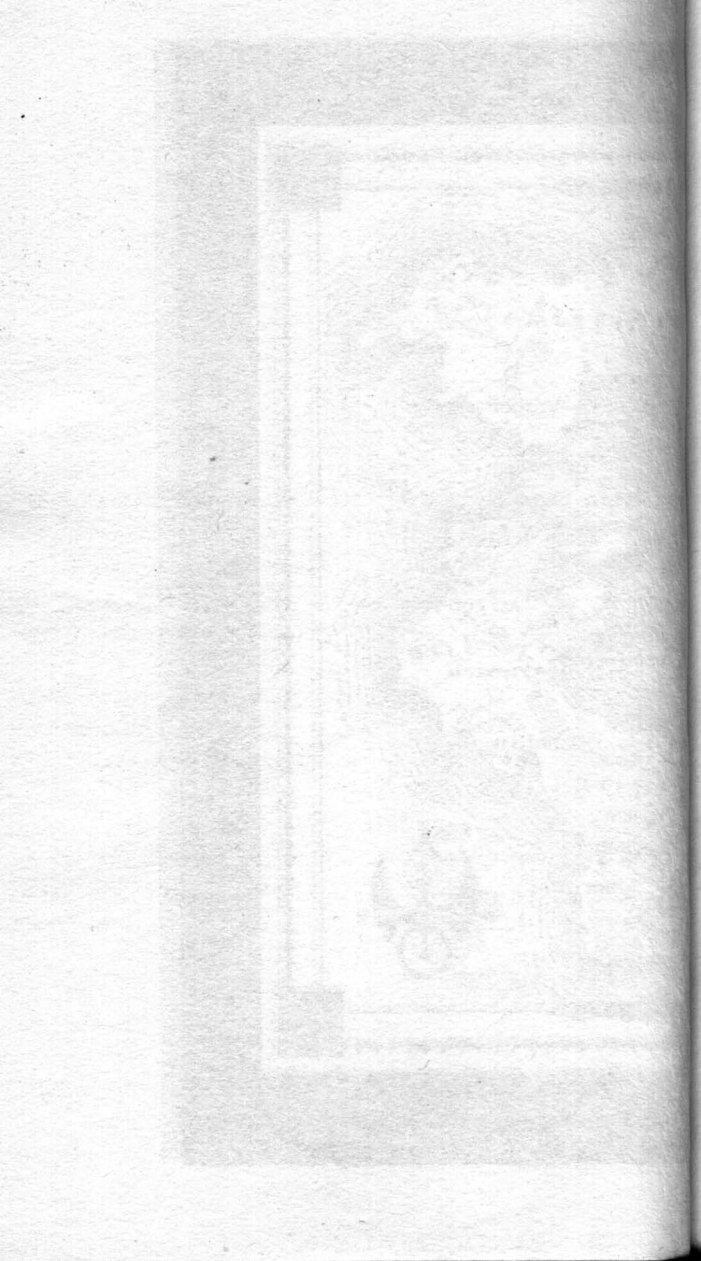
And the terrible day came when Lord Blackthorn marched against the great army of the King. Foremost of His Majesty's defenders was the brave Sir Lazaro, resplendent in his silvery armor. When Blackthorn's dark troops appeared on the battlefield, the other knights lamented, "What bleak injustice befalls us that the kingdom battles itself?"

Sir Lazaro answered them, "There is no injustice, for we have honored the Virtues. We have lived as good men. We have passed this to our children. Therefore no wickedness can defeat us, for though we may die, evil has already fallen. To live well is the truest act of Justice."

And so did the Virtue of Justice triumph, though thousands of knights would perish in the flames on that horrifying day.







Prologue

“T
ell me what troubles you, Sartorius.”

“The plot has grown . . . complex.”

“Complexity is an illusion. The design is very simple. The Juka Clans are invading Logosia. The New Britannians are coming to help. We must do all that we can to ensure their success.”

“Perhaps that is a simple design for one in your position, Chamberlain Kavah, but it is my nation that falls under the enemy’s sword. I have just sacrificed most of my armada to further our scheme.”

“You have nothing to fear. The Pact of Four is strong. General Nathaniel and Warlord Bahrok will remove Blackthorn from power. After the war is over, you will be left in control. Always remember that ultimate goal, Lector. It will make your sacrifice bearable.”

“I am uncertain that Bahrok and Nathaniel are trustworthy. Already they have betrayed the secrecy of the Pact for the sake of their primitive honor.”

“You are correct, of course. They’re ambitious savages. But they are useful to our purposes.”

"And what about me, Kavah? Am I a useful savage, as well?"

"I hold the Technocrats in the highest esteem, Your Excellency."

"You did not answer my question. What is your goal in this war? You have never made that clear and it gives me some magnitude of concern. The time has come for you to answer."

"Very well. Like you, I am unsatisfied with the . . . arrangements in my homeland. The Matriarchs have disrupted the ancient order of Meer society. I intend to correct that mistake."

"I see. Then you seek political power, like the rest of us do. And how does this war service your needs?"

"That is something you shall learn very soon. The scheme draws toward its conclusion. As it does so you must keep a clear head, Lector Sartorius. The plot is very simple. New Britannia and the Juka Clans will invade Logosia. We must ensure their success. We shall be rewarded in the end."

"As you say, Chamberlain. As you say."

1

Devastation at Akar

Thulann's braids, silky and white, streamed back at the cusp of a desert breeze. The elderly Juka stood as tall and straight as the walking staff she carried. Her slim figure parted the hot, bitter wind. Her long cloak danced and snapped behind her. The laces of her armor creaked.

In front of her the sky boiled ash and embers. Golden flames reflected in the sweat of her jade-green face. Her one, weathered eye stared out with mounting rage.

From atop a toothy, windswept bluff, she witnessed a fiery massacre. A distant Technocrat city burned redder than blood, sheeting the sky with clouds of black smoke. Three armies deployed on the cracked desert around it. One large force had seized the granite buildings of the city and occupied them in the midst of the hellish inferno. Even from miles away Thulann recognized the banners of Clan Kumar. They were her own people, the proud clan of Shirron Turlogan. They had succeeded in capturing this settlement, Akar, which was a key victory in the invasion of Logosia.

But the Technocrat defenders were extracting a deadly pay-

ment. If they could not hold Akar, the followers of Blackthorn looked eager to destroy it. Above the city hovered the dark hulks of Logosian airships, dozens of them, like iron spikes suspended from the clouds. Devastation rained down from the steam-driven war machines. Thulann saw spouts of amber flame feeding the blaze that tore through the captured buildings. She winced at the silver flashes of artificial lightning, eerily silent until the thunder reached her ears. She ground her teeth at the wafting reek of smoke and metal cinders.

The army of Clan Kumar was being decimated by fire, body by burning body.

By destroying Akar, the airships supported the retreat of the Technocrat ground army. The black-armored troops hurried southward, abandoning their dead soldiers and their wheeled war engines. The Logosians' march was hasty and desperate. They were beaten, vulnerable. Yet a third army watched unmoving, though it was poised to cut off their escape. The vast Jukan force arrayed in the west. Thulann could never mistake the tall banners of Clan Varang. Their chieftain, Warlord Bahrok, had finally arrived at Akar. And despite the fact that he was an ally, Bahrok took no action to help Clan Kumar escape its fiery destruction.

A small figure drew beside the old Juka and spat a curse. The human girl's sea-green eyes narrowed with fury. She bared her teeth and dragged russet curls from her pale, freckled brow. "Why doesn't Bahrok move in? This is the feast he's been hungry for! His catapults could drive off those airships. He's got eight thousand warriors standing around like virgins at a cathouse!"

Thulann pushed words through a wrinkled frown. "This battle is over, Toria. Clan Kumar has won it. What we are witnessing now is the calculated murder of the victors."

"You're saying Bahrok is deliberately waiting for our soldiers to be wiped out!"

"This is a trap, laid by Bahrok. He waited for our army to capture the city. Then he called upon his Technocrat accomplices to strike us down with their hidden airships. But breathe deep, child, and snuff your fears. We shall not be defeated. The slaughter will end soon."

Toria glanced at the tall Juka. "How do you know that?"

The old Way Master laid a palm on the hilt of her sword. "Because I am here now. I am going to stop it myself. Now help me down this hillside. These rocks are damnably loose. Defeating those airships will be difficult enough without a broken ankle hindering my bladesmanship."

The desert floor was parched and dusty, laced with fissures from a recent earthquake. Under a titanic column of smoke, Toria and Thulann drew near the burning city. A line of refugees moved past them, hurrying in the opposite direction. The civilians of Akar were fleeing toward the craggy hills in the west. Fear lit their soot-blackened eyes. Thulann knew why. Warlord Bahrok offered little mercy to the civilian victims of his conquests. To Bahrok, security was paramount. Every Logosian, human or Juka, he regarded as a patient enemy. Even a child could poison a well or cut a sleeping man's throat. They all deserved chains and guards.

Thulann pitied the warlord for his angry existence. She murmured a soft prayer for the terrified refugees. The wilds of Logosia would not be kind to them. The bedraggled families carried fewer possessions than even Thulann and Toria, who each hefted weapons and a well-laden shoulder sack.

The blasting heat of fiery Akar conjured whirlwinds from the sand. The two women wrapped scarves over their faces. Toria looked up at the many Technocrat airships, glowing in

the pillar of smoke like lanterns in a giant tree. Fire and lightning slashed down from the gloom. She clutched Thulann's arm and murmured, "How do we stop them, hey? Are we going up there?"

Thulann sighed at a twinge of pain in her back. Sixty-seven years had worn her body to its innermost nerves. She loosened her spine and answered, "When I was younger, I would have done precisely that. But after that business with Braun's Needle I have resolved to keep my feet within striking distance of the earth. This old crow has clipped her wings for good."

Flames clawed the outskirts of town, reaching up ten times the height of the redheaded Toria. She cried out, "Then what can we do? We don't have time to map out a plan. Venduss and Turlogan are inside there!"

"Indeed they are," growled the Way Master, "and I know where." Without another word she rushed into the city. Toria followed at her heels. When they reached the first slab-paved road, the horror of the battle grew tangible. The air scalded their exposed skin and eyes. Fumes and embers stole the breath from their mouths. When they darted between buildings the heat struck like a hammer. The hellish roar shook their bones. They moved with care amid smoldering debris, not only of ruined wood and ironwork but increasingly charred corpses, both Logosian soldiers and Jukan clansmen. Farther through the inferno they plunged and the mounds of bodies grew larger. Heat ignited the littered dead. The piles stirred with terrible animation; flaming breaths and smoking eyes. Screams rose like sparks in the air.

Blackthorn's war machines continued to smash the city from above. The ground shuddered and twitched.

In the chaos Thulann glimpsed Toria's expression and saw

the hardness growing. The aged Juka frowned. In time every young warrior learned to accept the nightmare scenes of war. Their eyes tempered like metal. The transformation was never joyful, and yet the hardening of Toria seemed particularly tragic. The minstrel had lived an impoverished childhood, but had emerged with her innocence intact. To lose it like this, to Bahrok's treachery, was violence of the worst kind.

But Toria never hesitated and neither did Thulann. The Way Master led them toward the center of town. From the distant bluff she had discerned a pattern to the Technocrat attacks. The fiercest blazes described a circle around the perimeter of Akar. This fiery wall imprisoned more than half of Clan Kumar's forces. The Jukan warriors sheltered under sturdy granite buildings. Centermost of all structures was a tall, pointed tower, bristling with chimney pipes. Thulann had spotted the Shirron's banner flying at the summit. It was clear evidence that the city had been captured before the airships arrived.

Thulann intended to reach that tower where Shirron Turlogan stood his ground. Turlogan was her lover of many decades. His smile was her only home. But today she did not seek him for selfish reasons. The battle hinged on his presence.

When they breached the interior of the ring of flames, the atmosphere grew bearable again. They paused to catch their breaths. Explosions echoed around them, joined by the haunting steam whistles and trumpets of Technocrat airships communicating with each other. Toria plugged her ears with a grimace, then muttered, "Great Mother! How can they do this to their own city? I thought they'd spent the last few years building it into an airship factory."

"Do not forget who orchestrates this atrocity. Warlord Bahrok and Lector Sartorius are both members of the Pact of Four. They have choreographed this battle from either side to further their own careers. I am certain Sartorius's rivals must be losing much in this battle. And yet both the Lector and the warlord are precise and efficient. I cannot believe that their goal is the simple destruction of Akar and Clan Kumar."

"Why not? A few more hours like this and both will be ashes."

Thulann shook her head. "The airships cannot maintain this pace. They will run out of munitions before night has fallen. Then they must retreat to Logos or Crevasse, lest Bahrok decide to knock them out of the sky with his artillery. Pact or no pact, Sartorius would never leave himself that vulnerable. No, this action has a more strategic objective. And I suspect I know what it is." Leaning on her walking staff, she peered around a corner and pointed. "Do you see the tower where Turlogan's banner flies? Notice the airships hovering just above it. Those are command vessels. Troop ships. They have deployed Janissars to capture or kill the Shirron. I am certain of it."

Toria squeezed her companion's shoulder. "And Venduss is with him! I've lost him twice now. I won't lose him again. We've got to find them!"

"On the contrary, we must ensure that they are not found. Unfortunately, Janissars are expert shock troops and not easily turned aside. They will not leave until they have what they came for. And I fear we have little chance of killing them all." She scrutinized the scene around the tower. From a distance the Logosian soldiers seemed tiny, though she knew most of them were quite tall and stout. Then she

pursed her lips and mumbled, "Perhaps there is a way. We shall have to scavenge from our own dead, but I doubt they will begrudge us." She glanced over the petite human. "Get undressed, Toria."

The girl startled. "Why?"

"Fetch out those Logosian clothes you have been carrying. I need bait for a trap and you have a gift for drawing men's eyes."

In the pandemonium of shadows and smoke they traversed the battered city. Shafts of lightning pounded the angular buildings, flinging rubble and ruined machinery with dangerous velocity. Thulann trusted her armor to ward off flying debris. But Toria was now dressed as a Logosian youth, in a short leather skirt and bodice that revealed more than they covered. An oiled cloak was her only protection from harm. So the Way Master knew they could waste no time in reaching the tower where Turlogan was barricaded with his personal Tarkosh guard. With regret she hurried past groups of Kumar clansmen who huddled under strong metal roofs. She could hear their curses when lightning strokes exploded nearby. She longed to reassure them, but could not afford the delay.

I am here now, she called out in her thoughts. I shall put a stop to this.

The grey tower at the center of Akar was angled like a steep pyramid. Tall chimney pipes bristled along its height. The structure was ringed by Technocrat troops, some of whom battled to capture the tower, while others fended off Jukan warriors desperate to aid their chieftain from outside. Thulann and Toria used the cover of a large pipeline to slip past the enemy forces. The clamor of battle afforded them freedom. They hid in the complex of doors and courtyards

that surrounded the base of the tower, where Janissars clashed with the Shirron's elite Tarkosh guard.

Overhead, Turlogan's proud banner undulated against the roiling blackness. Thulann watched it for an indulgent moment. She was only minutes away from the tall chieftain, with whom she ached to reunite. But he was not her present goal. Instead, from the smoky gloom she scrutinized the Logosian troops. Soon she found what she needed. She nudged her petite companion.

Toria let out a shriek as she sprinted across an open courtyard. Her minstrel's voice cut through the din and fetched the ears of a group of Janissars. The girl was convincing as an Akarian native. The Janissars pointed and bellowed in protest as Thulann chased after her. A stroke from the Way Master's sword drew blood from Toria's arm. Then the two women ran through a doorway that Thulann had carefully selected.

The Way Master faded into the shadows and listened. Boot steps clambered after them. The Janissars had fallen for the ruse. Inside the high-vaulted corridor, Toria clutched her superficial wound and glowered at the old Juka. Thulann waved her off. The Janissars had arrived. The girl loosed another scream to draw them deeper into the corridor.

Five men charged past Thulann. She nurtured a calm, protracted breath, then flashed into their midst with a drawn sword. A quick sweep felled two Janissars, one with a severed windpipe and the other with a slash across the face. The latter was down but not dead, though Thulann could not spare a heartbeat to worry about it. Two enemies whirled to face her while the last one bolted after Toria. Thulann selected the weaker of her opponents and darted around him, so that he shielded her from the larger Janissar. Then she engaged

him in a dance of blades, her ornamented Garronite steel clanging against his razor-edged Logosian hook sword. Their tempo was frantic. In the granite corridor the weapons chattered a loud, metallic song. It finished when she guided her swordpoint through a seam in his armor and slit open certain organs in his torso. He snarled as he collapsed.

Thunder roared as the ground rushed up and hammered Thulann in the chin. The larger Janissar had kicked her. A heavy boot stamped on her white braid, pinning her head to the floor. The man grunted as he brandished a weapon that was apparently quite heavy, though she could not turn her face to see it. Without thinking she tossed her braid around his ankle, then kicked up her legs and rolled end-over-end. The braid became a snare around the Janissar's leg, unbalancing him. His weapon smashed the stone floor inches from Thulann's cheek. Granite chips stung her eye. She planted her feet and sprang away, her hair no longer trapped.

The Janissar recovered his balance while Thulann blinked away the dust. Her vision focused on the gigantic man. The Logosian Juka stood nearly two heads taller than herself. His frame was wide and athletic. She judged him to be close in size to the mountainous Shirron himself.

That was, of course, why she had not killed him first.

The man hoisted an enormous hammer into guard position. Its striking surface was augmented by a spring-mounted plate. Through the facemask of his helmet she could see his furious eyes and the outraged twist to his frown. "I know you," he growled. "Thulann of Garron. The Way Master who serves the Shirron."

She bowed her head a bit, panting. "You have me at a disadvantage."

"You withered monster! You preyed on chivalry to trap us."

"I apologize. I would have preyed on something less noble, but my thoughts are not as agile as they once were. I have grown old and distracted."

"And dishonorable as well. I'd heard better of Way Masters." His fists tightened on the haft of his maul. He stepped a pace nearer. His footwork was unerring. "I thought you were gone to New Britannia. They told us that's why the sneak attack was not detected."

"You flatter me, but I have concluded my business abroad."

"Business more important than your Shirron? Then it's true that Garronites prefer intrigue to loyalty!"

A pang darted through her gut. She disapproved of this conversation. Soundlessly she assumed a ready stance, two hands on her sword hilt, as perfect and still as an instructional diagram. Her eye fixed on his chest. "I have returned now. Reckon with me."

"That I will."

When he advanced into her range, one clean stroke from her sword penetrated his chestplate at a joint. She felt her blade cleave an underlayer of padding and part the Janissar's flesh. She thrust her swordtip inside his shoulder. He sneered in pain.

Then his giant hammer smashed against her breastbone. Ribs popped and the corridor spun. Her weak leg smacked the wall with brutal speed, wrenching it at the hip. She toppled down. By instinct she folded into a ball and rolled, then stood and swatted away a second blow.

He had knocked the breath from her lungs. Without a respite she would falter in a few seconds. Before that could happen she carved a pattern of strikes in the air to freeze

him in a defensive sequence. Then she dropped to the ground and wheeled her leg at his ankles. He jumped over her legsweep. Without a pause she spun around again and on the second turn her foot connected. The Janissar hit the floor hard. She rammed her blade at the gap in his chest armor, but missed it by an inch.

Her lungs burned. She cartwheeled backward and caught her breath. As sultry air tumbled into her chest, the enormous Logosian sprang up and grabbed her. With a practiced move she twisted loose, but by then she hurtled through the air once more. She was upside down when her back slammed the wall. Inverted, she saw the man's hammer racing toward her head. Her only possible reaction was to turn her face away from the blow.

When the spring hammer struck, her head lay flush against the smooth, granite wall. The shell of her helmet collapsed and transmitted the impact to her skull. Vision and thought exploded apart in a burst of brilliant white. The pain was spectacular. She fell to the ground.

Though her body answered the command to rise, her head felt like iron. Her ears chirred with deafening volume. Her sword was gone, nor could she see to find it. Blindly she jabbed a lunge kick where she thought the Janissar might be. He grunted as she knocked him away. She tore another breath from the air, then tracked the vibration of her opponent's footfalls and leapt at him.

She fastened a grip on his arms. Her brief panic disappeared. Her eyesight had not yet returned, but she did not require it immediately. Darkness suited wrestling forms. She clamped a hold on his elbows, which no amount of strength could untangle. He twirled his body, preparing to slam her to the ground, but after decades of training her limbs moved

unconsciously into position. As both combatants started to fall, her legs scissored around his throat. They dropped and his weight pounded atop her, but she locked herself into place and ignored the pain. The choking maneuver was complete. He would sleep soon, despite any effort he might undertake.

Something stung her waist. Though his strength was vanishing and his arms were pinned, the Janissar had forced his knee up at a startling angle. The top of his boot was barbed with a squat knife, which he drove into her flank. Bands of blood streamed from the wound, but she was confident the attack would not kill her before he lost consciousness. She thanked the Great Mother that the blade was not poisoned.

More running footsteps came to her ears. Her bruised eye regained sight, as if she stared into a murky pool, in which appeared the russet-haired Toria. The human was bloody and her clothes were torn, but she charged down the corridor with healthy rage. Above her head she lifted a large cutlass that shimmered with otherworldly light. Her target was the Janissar who pinned Thulann to the ground. The girl's enchanted blade stroked down with a noise like an ocean wind.

Thulann had to react with perfect timing. She kicked the cutlass aside, just before it severed the Janissar's spine. The shock of impact numbed her leg. The blade crashed on the floor and cast up a spray of sparks. In the next instant the Janissar yanked his throat away from Thulann's clutches, though his strength was nearly gone. He lay gurgling for a breath.

Thulann barked at Toria, "We must not kill him!" Then she stared into the man's glassy eyes and muttered, "What is your name, warrior?"

The weakness of his voice did not diminish its pride: "I am Master Enosh of Junction."

"I greet you with respect and honor, Master Enosh. You fight splendidly and honorably. And no, I do not deny your charge that my people are afflicted with intrigue. But before you condemn us, I advise you to observe your own Lectors. Sartorius betrays your people. You yourself are the tool of his schemes."

The Janissar growled angrily, "You're lying."

"I feint in battle, but I do not lie." Thulann winced at her injured ribs. Then she cocked back an elbow, ready to strike the Janissar. "Now I must apologize, but you have become my tool, as well. Take comfort that I have chosen you for the most flattering of reasons." Her elbow landed on his face with a loud *crack*. When he did not fall unconscious, she repeated the action.

Master Enosh lolled onto the ground. Thulann's arm throbbed with pain.

Toria was peering through the doorway at the battle outside. She wiped blood from her cheek and murmured, "No one else is coming, but we'd better hurry all the same."

Thulann summoned a Way Master's composure against the torment of her injuries. She staggered to her feet and said, "You may put your armor back on, child. And bring me a lockpick and that bottle of ink Captain Bawdewyn gave you. He must forgive you writing him one less letter, for the sake of the nation of Jukaran."

Pain lanced her torso. Thulann realized with dismay that she had fallen down again. Her skull boomed like an iron drum. As Toria leapt to her side the old Juka rasped, "And find me a healing potion, if you please. Concussions are not as deadly as sword-thrusts and stricken hearts, but they

weaken you like the former and knock you senseless like the latter."

Toria rushed away to retrieve their gear. Thulann sat up and gritted her teeth to resist a savage headache. Then she steadied her breathing, raised an elbow above Master Enosh's unconscious face and resumed her exhausting work.

Someday, the Way Master resolved, she would commission a suit of Janissar armor specifically fitted to her body. As a spy she had many occasions to don the enemy's mail. For all of their advanced manufacturing methods, however, the Technocrats could not seem to fashion armor that was remotely comfortable for her. Straps bound too tightly. Hidden corners worried her skin. Despite the absence of ornamentation, Technocrat suits were heavier, not lighter, than those crafted in Jukaran. Thulann could not fathom it. Perhaps the philosophy of the Machine dictated that its adherents must suffer. More likely, she surmised, Logosian armorers were either unconcerned with comfort or unabashedly sadistic.

Currently she endured the Technocrats' handiwork in her disguise as a Logosian soldier. Through smoky corridors she made her way toward the Janissars who ringed Turlogan's tower. Behind her she dragged the body of Master Enosh. The Janissar was not dead, but Thulann and Toria had altered his appearance a great deal. He was dressed now in fine, if bloody, Garronite armor. His head was shaven. Toria had burned away the Janissar tattoo that adorned his massive arm, while Thulann had used ink and a needle-like lockpick to inscribe a new tattoo on his chest. The marking was distinctive, simple and regal: the sigil of the Shirron himself.

To complete the masquerade, Thulann had battered Mas-

ter Enosh's face until it was entirely unrecognizable. He would not wake for many days, since the Technocrats did not embrace healing magic.

Now she hauled his limp, heavy form back to the Janissar troops. She took care to select a platoon on the far side of the tower from Enosh's own company. When she broke into the open, her ears pulsed with the thunder of battle and the blare of airship horns. Several Logosians scrambled to help her. Wearing a full Technocrat face plate, she was not concerned about being recognized. "It's the Shirron!" she howled at the others. "Take him, quick! His guardsmen can't be far behind me!"

The Janissars looked incredulous. "How did you get to him? What company are you from?"

"I serve with Master Enosh and I want to get back there fast! Haul this Garronite beast to your airship so we can get out of this inferno. That monster Bahrok is lurking outside of town and I don't trust him to keep civil much longer."

Thulann found Toria in the shadows of the original corridor, repacking their belongings. The girl was again dressed in the leather armor of a New Britannian buccaneer. The knee-length hauberk was a bit too large, but in Toria's case it seemed neither uncomfortable nor unflattering. Thulann envied the girl's versatility. "It is done," commented the Way Master, joining Toria in the gloom. She found her walking staff and leaned her weight upon it. "Do you hear how the war trumpets have changed their melody? They believe they have acquired their prey, and so they are retreating. Bahrok will move his troops in presently."

The minstrel hissed, "He's got a lot to answer for. I can't wait till he shows that ugly face!"

Thulann sighed. "I shall be content to separate my face

and the rest of my body from this unforgiving suit of armor. These Technocrat disguises are murder—”

Without warning someone smashed into her from the thick of the darkness. She flung to the ground. A cruel pain chewed her calf. The Way Master immediately knew that her game leg had broken again. She flipped away her attacker and tumbled to a defensive stance.

The man fell upon her once more. She plucked the sword from his grip and hurled it aside. Fighting unarmed, he engaged her with a barrage of expert kicks and punches. Thulann recognized the techniques of a Way Master, which meant he was a clansman, probably a Tarkosh guardsman. His stealth was impressive to have eluded her notice. Through his guard she jabbed an open-palm blow that thumped onto his throat. His steel gorget did not absorb the entire force. He gasped, then kicked her in the chest and toppled her backward. Her sore ribs complained.

She dove into deeper shadows and bit down a smoldering anger. Then a glittering light invaded the dark corridor. Toria had unsheathed her enchanted cutlass, strewing brilliant motes like flashing sand. The girl's face shone pale in the eerie glow. She ran toward the silhouette of their attacker.

The man choked out the name, “Toria?!”

The minstrel froze in place and answered, “Venduss?”

Thulann closed her eye and frowned. A part of her was relieved that her former student was alive and healthy. Another part wanted to punish Venduss for attacking her without verifying that she was truly Logosian, despite the armor she wore. But prudence cautioned her to stillness. Until a week ago, Toria had believed that Venduss was dead, and not until this moment did Venduss know that his lover yet lived. Thulann had no part in this reunion.

Then another burst of light chased away the gloom altogether. Thulann recognized the radiance of a magical spell. It sprang from the tip of a bladed spear, held aloft by a young Jukan woman in a white robe. Painted on her brow was an intricate symbol. Her garment distinguished her as an Initiate of the Way.

The Jukan magician was preparing to unleash sorcery at Toria.

Thulann stood in full view and snapped, "Enough!" In a quick motion she removed the Janissar helmet, allowing the attackers to see her face. Both of them dropped to their knees.

"Teacher!" gulped Venduss.

"Way Master," murmured the young woman, bowing her head with obeisance proper to a lesser member of Thulann's order. Her spell faded away, replaced by a soft, benign light.

The old Juka sniffed at the ache of her broken leg. She regained her walking staff and stamped it against the floor. "Venduss! Get up, suckling! You are learning to be a war master now. You kneel only to the Great Mother herself." The tall warrior rose at her order, though Thulann did not command his attention. His gaze was still attached upon Toria, whose own expression was transforming from shock to delight. Thulann added, "See what I found overseas, Venduss? It turns out that when humans die, they only go to New Britannia."

Her green eyes dampening, the minstrel rushed forward and threw her arms around the young warrior. But her happy murmurs clipped short when Venduss stiffened and pulled away. His face was taut with disbelief. Toria stepped back a pace, confused.

Thulann sighed and motioned to the kneeling Jukan

woman. "Toria, allow me to introduce Tekmhat of Clan Eryem, daughter of Warlord Savan. She is betrothed to Venduss. Tekmhat, this is my traveling companion, Toria of New Britannia."

The two young women regarded each other with cryptic expressions. When Tekmhat glimpsed Thulann again, she cast her eyes downward. Toria's blood-smeared face hardened once more, as it had when they traversed the burning city. "I've come back to you, Venduss," she said with measured calm. "I am happy to see you fit and breathing."

Venduss composed himself and answered, "As am I, Toria. The Great Mother blesses us with good fortune."

Thulann's broken bone sang with pain. Her patience dissolved. She snorted, "You are quite fortunate indeed, nursling, that Tekmhat is learned in the arts of water magic. If my leg is not soon healed, I am liable to grow angry with you!"

Tekmhat dashed to her aid. Using a spell learned from a New Britannian sorcerer, the teenager flooded Thulann's leg with exquisite, sparkling relief. As she did so the Jukan girl muttered, "Way Master, what has happened? Why are the Technocrats retreating?"

"I have given them fool's gold and they took it for the real thing. Pray that they do not uncover the deception before Bahrok secures the city. But even still, this nightmare is not over. We are trapped in an inferno and our army is scattered. We must quit this town and regroup. Our injured are legion. Tekmhat, with your healing magic I daresay you shall be the most exhausted of us all by morning."

Venduss turned away and knelt to recover his sword, which lay on the ground nearby. Over his shoulder he

remarked, "My father is recovering near the peak of the tower. The fighting has been heavy. He will be glad to see you, Thulann."

The old Juka nibbled her lip. "Indeed. There is much work to do. He cannot carry this burden alone."

Her three companions gave no further comment. As they prepared to go, tension forced an uneasy quiet. Thulann joined in the silence. Days as black as this one were beyond the scope of conversation. The shadows between words more accurately expressed the pain.

Outside the corridor, in the burning city, the boom of Technocrat thunderbolts dwindled like the fading of an old storm.

The chamber was sour with blood and sweat. Twilight deepened the shadows. The flames of Akar slung rippling light through a tall, iron-barred window. A giant of a warrior stood in the crimson glow, an armored outline watching the wreckage of a city. Shirron Turlogan held a notched sword in one hand. His grip was fierce. His breathing was heavy and doleful.

Thulann slipped her fingers into his other hand. Though both Juka wore fighting gloves, the warmth of the touch was overwhelming. Their fingers laced together as if they had never parted. Turlogan relaxed just slightly. He had not yet looked at her, nor did he have to.

"The Technocrat armada has been defeated," she said, knowing what his first question would be. "Braun's Needle is destroyed. The New Britannians are preparing to sail to our aid."

The Shirron nodded. His voice pinched through angry lips. "We shall need it. Kumar is decimated." He squeezed

her palm. "Welcome home. I wish I could give you happy news in turn."

She conjured a hint of a smile. "No need, my love. Just sing me a bad poem."

"Look around you. This is my poetry today." The room was littered with dead Janissars. Firelight glinted in the wetness.

"Gruesome as ever," she murmured, then leaned against him. "How did Venduss fare in the attack?"

"Marvelously. He commands with conviction. He thinks and acts quickly. The war masters are fond of teaching him." For an instant his face lightened. He wrapped a long arm around her. "You did well with my son."

The Way Master pressed her temple to his shoulder. She sensed the rage bound in his muscles. "And not so well with you. I should have done better not to go to New Britannia. The airships—"

Turlogan's finger touched her lips. "No one in our clan is to blame."

His tone betrayed the lie. Thulann could see whom he blamed. Her absence had played a part in the disaster—if she had not left the continent, she might have discovered the trap before it sprung—but history would record the welfare of a clan as the responsibility of its chieftain. The weight of it hardened the Shirron's wrinkled face.

In her mind the aged woman whispered *I should have been here*, though no sound passed through her lips. Her arm snaked around her lover's waist. Her presence beside him conveyed as much of a statement as the bleak circumstances warranted.

By the next sunrise, the scope of the devastation was clear. Fires still smoldered in isolation, but the worst of the

inferno was finished. Akar was a charred boneyard, heaped with corpses and cracked, ruined buildings. The soldiers of Clan Varang had secured the remains. They looted what few spoils the fires had left intact.

Throngs of refugees herded into barricades. Warlord Bahrok's troops scoured the western hills for escapees. Untended livestock dispersed in clumps across the sandy desert, where Logosia's wild predators collected for a meal. Swarms of scavengers attended to their duty.

The survivors of Clan Kumar mustered in the arid plain to the north. Between the battle for Akar and the subsequent air attack, the losses to the army were terrible. Of a force of eight thousand, a full third had perished. Three thousand more suffered from diseases or injuries more severe than the clan healers could soon repair. The remaining soldiers were afforded little rest as they cared for the wounded and sorted the dead. A host of ridgebacks pulled charnel wagons. Funeral smoke pillared the desert.

The mood of the encampment was dour. Daylight had transformed anger into numbness. The only sounds were metallic, the clink of tools and the rattle of iron-shod wheels. Heat rose quickly in the windswept desert. Tiny steel creatures scuttled between shadows, the mechanical vermin of Logosia.

Once the army had regrouped, Thulann had convinced Turlogan to retire to his pavilion and rest. He had to be strong and alert now, for the sake of the clan. For some time that morning they lay together while Thulann postulated a lawful course of action against Bahrok. Even though Turlogan was the Shirron, he could not pass judgment on a grievance in which he himself was the injured party. Thulann decided that the only answer was to summon a council

of warlords to vote. Bahrok would bring his allies to speak and Turlogan would bring his own, and so the unaligned clans would ultimately decide whether to punish Varang and in what kind.

Turlogan listened to Thulann's words and never once dissented. Yet she knew that his thoughts still smoldered with Akar.

She woke to the flutter of a tent flap, bright in the desert sun. She did not know how long she had slept. Her heart immediately chilled.

Turlogan was gone. His weapons and armor were not in the pavilion.

She dashed outside to find Toria sitting in the shade of the tent. The girl held a Logosian padlock and absently toyed her lockpicks inside it. When the lock drooped open, she snapped it shut again.

"Toria, did you see the Shirron?"

"He was walking to the south end of the camp, half an hour ago."

"Damn." She glanced at the human, whose tone had been sour. "I thought you were assisting the healers."

"I wasn't much help. The Initiates use so much healing magic now, I'm just in the way."

"Next time use songs instead of bandages. Music helps the dying as well as the injured. But as long as you are not presently occupied, I have a task for you. Find Venduss and tell him to meet me here as soon as possible. Make sure that he stays put until I arrive. It is very important that he does so."

Toria closed her eyes. "I'd rather not see him, mistress. Not this morning."

"Our actions determine the future of the clan. You may

settle your affair with Venduss at your own pace, but do not expect history to slow down for you!" At the minstrel's scowl she added, "Please, Toria. I need you right now."

With a nod and a sigh, the girl tossed away the lock and trotted off to find the Shirron's son. Thulann hurried back inside the pavilion and laced up her own armor.

The southern edge of the camp faced the smoking ruins of Akar, a mile away. Around the city clustered the peaked tents of Clan Varang. Thulann took a ridgeback from the nearest corral and started in that direction. Clouds of dust rose phantomlike around her. To keep from breathing the fine desert sand she pressed her sleeve over her mouth. She owned a black silk scarf that normally served the purpose, but it was missing from Turlogan's pavilion when she awoke.

As she approached Warlord Bahrok's vast encampment, a small commotion caught her eye. Soldiers streamed from their tents and gathered into a crowd. She kicked her ridgeback into a trot. Before long she plunged through the crowd to reach Shirron Turlogan. Unmolested, he walked among the startled soldiers, heading for the pavilion of Bahrok himself. Thulann dismounted and took step beside him.

She assumed a regal bearing and whispered, "After careful deliberation, then, you have decided to stick a knife in Bahrok's gut?"

"It is my legal right to seek the Black Duel."

"It is not the best answer. The council of warlords—"

"I shall not defend Kumar's honor with words! I am after vengeance, not redress."

"I know the Duel better than anyone. Now is the wrong time. Please turn around."

"Not even for you, my dearest."

Thulann paused, then muttered, "Are you rested enough to beat him?"

A wild flash lit his eyes. "In this affair I have rested enough to cut down Blackthorn himself. Do you not think?"

She tried to stifle a smirk, but failed. "Each one in his turn, love."

The warriors of Varang followed them with murmuring tension. Their faces registered confusion. When they pointed at Turlogan their individual moods shifted. Some appeared relieved, others somber, yet others sad or angry. Thulann realized that these men had thought the Shirron was captured or dead. His appearance this morning must be a shock. She wondered what lies Bahrok had told them to justify yesterday's treachery. These soldiers were loyal to their chieftain, and rightly so, but they were also Juka and men of honor. Many of them would not sleep well tonight.

Nor were they alone in their surprise. When Thulann and Turlogan reached the warlord's pavilion, Bahrok himself greeted them outside with a perplexed frown. The stocky chieftain was Thulann's height, much less than the Shirron, though both men shared a similar weight. Bahrok was dressed in a robe and trousers of exquisite material and utilitarian design. On his left hand he wore a glove. In his gaze sparkled angry cunning. "Shirron Turlogan! I was told you were captured last night!"

"Inside," growled the aged warrior as he pushed past the warlord and stepped under the large tent.

Bahrok squinted, then glanced at Thulann. "And you have returned so soon from New Britannia? Then surely it was you who freed him from the Technocrats' hands."

She shook her head. "Every hand that touched him lies

severed on the floor. He was never captured, Bahrok, because I know how you think."

"I?"

She snorted. "The next time you want to commit treason, give clearer details to the enemy. The Janissars kidnapped the wrong person. I could paste feathers on a fleshwing and they would take it for an eagle."

"Mind your words, old witch. I do not indulge accusations." He tied shut the tent door after they passed through it. When he faced into the room, Shirron Turlogan stood inches from him. Bahrok stared at the older man's chest.

Turlogan glared down and took a deep breath. "I am here for payment. You will honor me."

"Of course. Your army is in need of assistance. I shall do everything I can to escort them back to Jukaran." He followed the comment with a smile.

The Shirron seized Bahrok's collar with a large hand. The warlord snatched his wrist in return and both chieftains traded glowers. Turlogan barked, "Oh, you will pay me, warlord, every price I name! Because despite what you have done I am still stronger than you. I shall always be stronger than you. No bluster or backstabbing can change that fact and you know it." He released Bahrok's collar with a slight shove.

The warlord crossed his arms and smirked. "Stronger than I? Your army is sliced in half, Shirron. I am no scholar, but I think your math is faulty."

Thulann interjected, "Soldiers do not vote in a council of warlords! The other chieftains will weigh your punishment and I assure you, justice will be your heaviest burden."

Bahrok spat a laugh. "A council, shall it be? During an invasion? By all means summon one! The chieftains will not

gather again until I am leading them down the streets of Logos to accept Blackthorn's surrender. Call for my blood on that day, if you believe your case is strong enough."

"We shall," she growled, "if we do not yet have satisfaction."

Turlogan gripped her shoulder. "Thank you, my dear, but I have my own mouth with which to bite. And bite you I shall, Bahrok, until the bone cracks."

The warlord's tone lowered a register. "Do you threaten a clan war now? With Logosia laid out like a meal before us and the New Britannians coming for dinner? You are as brash as your human-loving son and just as foolish."

The aged Shirron snarled, "Foolish! Let me demonstrate what kind of fool I am." From his sleeve he withdrew Thulann's black scarf, which he flung on the ground before Bahrok. "I am fool enough to wager everything on that piece of silk. Look at it, you viper! Look closely, because that is something you have forgotten. That is the Jukan soul. We face conflict with law and honor, not with treasonous pacts and needless slaughter. We are not barbarians!"

Warlord Bahrok stared at the black scarf with uneasy suspicion. Thulann almost imagined he was shrinking away from it. With an etched brow he muttered, "What do you mean, wager everything?"

"I mean you and I, sword to sword, horn to horn. If I win the Black Duel, you pledge your loyalty to me without question or condition. And if I lose, I shall step down from the office of Shirron. Only by tournament can you win the right to succeed me, but I shall no longer stand in your way and neither, as you know, will anyone else."

Thulann's body went cold. "Turlogan—"

The immense Shirron ignored her. "Why do you hesitate,

Bahrok? Is that not what you most desire, what you have slavered over for so many years, like a hound by a butcher's door? There lies the meat, still bloody to taste. Bare your teeth, dog!"

Thulann clutched her fists together. The breath caught in her throat. She wished she could pluck up the scarf and throw it away, but nothing could withdraw the challenge now. This was the decision Turlogan's pride demanded.

Bahrok peered at the black silk, then glanced up at Turlogan and opened a toothy grin. "Die in your sleep, old man. I shall not notch my blade for your sake." His emerald lips parted and he spat on the black scarf. His eyes never released the Shirron's gaze.

Thulann winced. She realized that Bahrok had planned this entire scene. And he was playing it with a craft and patience of which she had not thought him capable.

Turlogan's face ignited with fury. "You still fear me! Forty years ago I beat your father in the Great Tournament, and you still see me with a child's terrified eyes!"

"Fear you? Turlogan, I have already beaten you! After the war the other chieftains will clamor for me to replace you. Your throne is a sham. Your clan is in ruins. March around Logosia with your one-eyed nanny on a leash, if it suits you, but I have an invasion to complete. I shall not smear my hands on the filth of your reputation!" With a snort he kicked a plume of dust over the black scarf and stomped deeper into the pavilion.

The air in the tent seemed to lurch as Shirron Turlogan hurtled forward and threw his fist at Bahrok. The warlord saw the attack but could not evade it. Gauntleted knuckles crashed against his cheekbone and the warlord tumbled backward, upending a desk amid a flurry of loose parch-

ment. In an instant Bahrok was on his feet again with blade in hand. Turlogan's broadsword flashed as well. Thulann rushed forward to intervene, though she had no hope of stopping them.

Then Bahrok raised his sword over his shoulder and flipped it at the ground. The blade stuck through the patterned rug and deep into the packed sand underneath. He lifted his chin, spread out his arms and presented his unarmored chest to the Shirron. "This is your honor? This is your law? It seems you are a barbarian, after all! Nor am I surprised, after the way you squandered a throne built by your own mother and father. You have no more discipline, old man. Forty years in that palace have broken you apart. You are an honest catastrophe."

"Pick up that scarf and I shall show you how broken I am!"

"Go back to Garron, Turlogan. Polish that fine sword for Venduss's wedding. Occupy yourself until the end comes. It shall not be long now."

The Shirron slapped his blade into its sheath, then with lightning speed snatched Bahrok's collar again. The warlord tried to free himself but Turlogan swatted away his hands and pulled him off-balance. Leaning down into Bahrok's face, the taller Juka muttered, "As a coward, you are an absolute trailblazer! You redefine the term. That is the legacy you have secured at Akar. You have defeated yourself, not me! Not me. You have not beaten me."

He thrust Bahrok against a tent pole. The pavilion shuddered. Then he turned away and stormed out the door, his exquisite, bloody armor creaking at its leather joints. The shambles of the room seemed to roil in his wake. The tent flap hung slightly open, admitting a slash of bright desert sun.

Thulann knew better than to touch the Shirron as he left, or to follow him. Her heart wrung in her chest.

Bahrok straightened his robe and snorted. "Rancid old pteranx."

The Way Master sneered, "Quiet, vermin! Savor your success today. Tomorrow you will die for it. Or the next day, or the next."

The warlord's face eased into a smirk. "He never had your wit, old hag. He is a helpless child without you."

She closed her weary eye and sighed. "I know that."

Under a brightening sky, Turlogan was a tiny spot in the distance as Thulann guided her ridgeback across the desert toward him. The tents of Clan Kumar spread out ahead of them. The Shirron walked in silence. She trotted alongside him and murmured, "You were right, you know. Bahrok was terrified of you. He always shall be."

Turlogan reached out a hand and patted her forearm gently. Then he quickened his pace without uttering a sound. Thulann grimaced, then hurried ahead to clear the way to his pavilion. He would not benefit from the attention of soldiers just now, nor would the soldiers benefit from his.

The Shirron's large tent looked deserted until Thulann peeked inside. She fell quiet. Toria and Venduss were there, as she had requested. The Way Master had wanted to ensure that Venduss did not interfere with the confrontation between Turlogan and Bahrok; but the young warrior and Toria were taking advantage of this rare opportunity for privacy. They stood together and embraced. It was a long, emphatic touch that expressed what words could not, a touch that knew neither the past nor the future but existed willfully in the present. They pressed a moment of time between their bodies and held it there.

Thulann pulled away from the tent flap and sat down outside. Heartbeats stamped through her willowy frame. She summoned a trance to steady herself, then gazed ahead at the place where Turlogan would soon appear. In her mind he had already arrived, bearing on his broad shoulders the weight of this desert morning. The dry wind brought dampness to her eye.

I should have been here, my love, she called to him, but I will not leave your side again.

2

Junction

And when Sir Lazaro and his knights reached the bottom level of the cavern, they found a great chamber hot with smoke and lava. The cave bared its stalagmites like the teeth of a giant dragon. A dark shape slithered through the haze, clicking its claws on the stone floor and drooling flame from its snout. Sir Jacob of Yew led the charge against the ancient wyrm but it was Sir Lazaro's enchanted sword, the Talon of Covetous, that finally slew the monster. Ten knights lay dead beside its carcass.

Deeper in the cavern the survivors found a hoard of gold and silver. Sir Lazaro surrendered his share of the treasure. In exchange he took a simple iron pot, inscribed with peculiar runes. The knight-wizard Lord Blackthorn recognized the Cauldron of Kwan Li, a fabled artifact that rendered immortality upon the ancient wyrms of Sosaria. The other knights were amazed when Sir Lazaro placed the cauldron on the ground and smashed it to pieces with his magic sword, the blade of which flew apart in the action.

On that day did the brave knight forfeit his legendary weapon and the riches of a king in order to protect Britannia from the

hunger of the wyrms. In the bowels of the earth, the Virtue of Sacrifice triumphed once again.

Steel rivets clattered as the iron door rolled open. Steam and bright light tumbled into the darkened room. Two silhouettes stood in the doorway. One of them wore a robe and hood that concealed the shape of his body. The other stood tall and proud, his outline glinting from silvery plate armor. A triangular shield hung on one arm. A sword flashed in his hand.

The knight Montenegro took a step into the chamber and peered through the sultry murk. Steam and darkness concealed details, but he sensed a large open space between himself and the far wall and a considerable height to the ceiling. Metallic clanks haunted the chamber, the echoes of great machinery behind the walls. The stench of hot grease nipped the air.

Silently Montenegro resolved, *I'll kill them if that's what it takes.*

Something moved in the gloom, a slick, mechanical sound. He could not place it. He lifted a small device to his face and hooked it to a stud on his helmet. The glass lens, banded with copper, pressed against one eye. For an instant his vision blurred. When he regained his focus, strange images resolved.

Through the sepia-hued lens he saw the room as if the darkness were gone. Steam still clouded the air, but he could make out the shape and contents of the chamber. The place resembled a large warehouse. The walls were fashioned of cement and steel. Wooden pallets crowded much of the floor space, stacked with half-assembled machine components in grotesque arrangements, like sculptures in frozen

animation. From cranes in the rafters drizzled a shower of chains, their hooks clicking together as they swayed among currents of hot air. Vents in the high walls exhaled thick, tumbling fumes.

A blur darted past the corner of Montenegro's eye. He whirled and thrust out his shield, but the movement was gone. The runner had exploited the limited peripheral vision of the miner's monocle. Whoever was out there was masterful at stealth. Nor was he the only enemy lurking in the storage chamber.

Montenegro grimaced. He had not come here to skulk around in the dark. He sheathed his sword, crouched low and dashed across the open space. His plate mail clacked with each footfall. Then he stepped to the side and jumped up, gaining purchase on a mound of gears and axles. The machine parts shifted under his weight. Stout netting held them together. He knelt atop the pile. From this vantage he could scout the room for concealed enemies.

His grey eyes punctured the gloom. No one else was visible, except for the robed figure in the doorway. With a frown he thought, *Where is everyone, then? Afraid to face a Montenegro?*

When a fierce light blinded him he knew the battle had come. He slammed his iron-clad shield in the path of a bolt of lightning that sprang from deep inside the room. The static shock banged through his armor like a physical blow. He kicked out his legs and dropped underneath the bolt. Arrows whizzed past him as he rolled away to the edge. Two enemy warriors lurked there, Technocrats in their distinctive armor, waiting for him to jump down. Instead he gripped the strands of netting. He slung out his feet. The men ducked, then charged forward as he clambered back onto

the mound. Missiles bashed his shield. Ignoring the impacts he whisked out his sword and sliced downward, severing the net and releasing an avalanche of heavy metal parts. The two Technocrat warriors leapt over the cascade of machinery, but lost their balance when they tried to land on it. They toppled into the steely, sharp-edged tide.

Montenegro let go of the chain from which he was hanging. He landed in an alert crouch.

Something clamped onto his shield. He spun around to see another Technocrat soldier behind him. This one wore a long, armored gauntlet with mechanical steel jaws at the end. The jaws bit down on his shield, chewing through its iron plating and shattering the wooden core. The knight released the shield. Then he kicked the jaws aside and clanged his sword against the Technocrat's chestplate. He recognized the sound of spring-enhanced kinetic armor. He changed his tactics to favor thrusting. The Technocrat dropped the shield and faced him. For a split second they gauged one another, then both men lunged forward. With furious speed they clashed in the gloom, longsword ringing, jaws snapping, throwing kicks and elbows amid a chorus of grunts and curses. Finally Montenegro unbalanced his opponent with a blow to the head, then knocked the man's legs out from under him. The knight flung himself atop the Technocrat and pressed the tip of his blade under the man's chin. The Technocrat froze.

Montenegro felt his own breaths suddenly shorten. He glanced down to see the Technocrat's steel-jawed gauntlet clamped around his own plate-armored throat. The weapon had nearly crushed the metal of his gorget.

They would both be dead men in another instant.

"Cease," boomed a voice from the doorway. The robed

silhouette raised one hand. "Brigadier Khyber, I believe the point is made."

Montenegro growled at his own lack of concentration. He pulled his longsword away from the Technocrat's head. His armor relaxed as the steel jaws unclamped from his own throat. Montenegro began to rise, when a loud *pop* startled him. He brandished his sword. The blade had been sheared in half by the mechanical jaws of the Technocrat's gauntlet.

The Logosian soldier threw back his facemask as he stood. The bearded human's expression was pitiless. "No, Your Excellency, *now* the point is made."

The knight snorted and flung down the broken sword. "Lector Gaff, you should whip your dogs when they snap like that. Otherwise they're likely to get into trouble."

Without emotion the hooded figure said, "Silence. The demonstration is complete. Conduct yourselves with civility."

"I was more civil than necessary in submitting to this test, but my tolerance is at an end. Patience, you recall, is not among the Virtues."

Lector Gaff nodded. "You have proven your skill against Brigadier Khyber. Let us proceed. The task before us is urgent." He turned a crank on a device in his hand. A blue light sprouted in the glass of the spark lantern, illuminating the Mathematician under his yawning cowl. Lector Gaff was a middle-aged man with a sharp, angular face. Every inch of his skin was laced with tattoos, depicting the intricate mathematical equations sacred to the order that he commanded. His deep-set eyes were as cold as the numbers surrounding them. They reflected the icy glow as if they were luminant themselves.

Montenegro caught the Mathematician's gaze for an instant. The knight narrowed his eyes. Gaff was the most

powerful man in Logosia, behind only Lector Sartorius and Blackthorn himself. His glance demanded respect. The knight could not deny the Mathematician's deadly cunning and steely charisma. He was a formidable, impressive leader.

Montenegro had disliked him from the moment they had met.

With a grumble the knight turned away, pulling off his metal helm. He removed the skullcap underneath, freeing long, ebony curls. Sweat dribbled down his cheeks. As more Technocrat soldiers emerged from the darkness, equipped with an assortment of mechanical weapons, Montenegro wiped his brow and muttered to Gaff, "For elite soldiers these men weren't trying very hard. Perhaps I should put them through a test of my own, to see if they are worthy of a Montenegro's time."

Brigadier Khyber growled back, "I know who you are. The grandson of the famous Sir Lazaro Montenegro. You may assure yourself, Sir Gabriel, that in Logosia we judge a man's worth by his skill, not his pedigree."

"Do not goad me, Khyber," warned the knight. "You are not far from becoming another head among the Technocrats I've collected."

The officer did not flinch. "Count yourself fortunate that you never met my brigade on the battlefield, or we would not be having this discussion now. You've never faced anyone like me."

The New Britannian saw that Brigadier Khyber was not boasting. The Logosian was not a large man, but his body was taut, fast and lethal. From his carriage and frosty countenance he projected an impression of forged confidence, the emotional callus of brutal combat experience. Montenegro knew that look. It could not be counterfeited.

The knight grunted. "Don't task me, Khyber, when we are supposed to be working together. Lector Gaff, I believe I can fight alongside these soldiers of yours. They have skill and spirit, even if they do bleed commoners' blood. Now I beg you to take me out of this place. We have plans to make and I find it difficult to concentrate in here, with the stench of your machines and your men."

Gaff nodded and stepped out the door, into the hallway beyond. Montenegro followed. The Mathematician entwined his fingers and said, "Come, then. We shall make arrangements for your continued stay in Junction. Though I must warn you that animosity toward Khyber helps no one. You and he must learn trust."

"Trust? Will he ever trust the man who sank Braun's Needle? The man who has personally killed dozens of Technocrat soldiers? He won't, and neither would I in his position." Montenegro sniffed as he tucked his helmet under one arm. "You will never trust me, either, Gaff, but that is irrelevant. We can work together without trust, as long as we are clear about each other's motivations."

"And precisely what is your motivation? Why have you come to join your enemy?"

"You know exactly why. I intend to stop this dishonorable war. You and I shall defeat Warlord Bahrok's army. We'll sue Shirron Turlogan for peace before the invasion gains momentum. Not a drop of New Britannian blood need be shed for the sake of this worthless landscape."

"Except perhaps for General Nathaniel's blood."

The Mathematician's tone had been cold. The knight raised an eyebrow. "You want to strike down the Pact of Four as badly as I do. And I thought Mathematicians were supposed to be emotionless."

"Lector Sartorius betrays the Machine. He is a component that must be replaced. It is a logical deduction, not an emotional one."

Montenegro grunted. "Call it by whatever name you see fit, but don't deny that you want revenge. Lies are most egregious when directed at oneself. Personally, I am not by nature a man who hides his feelings."

The Lector gave him no response, except to hand him a dark cloak. Montenegro donned the garment, which concealed his distinctive New Britannian plate mail. Then Lector Gaff led him down the wide corridor. The hall was fashioned of cement and stone. Its floor was rutted from the passing of many carts. Clearly the place was centuries old. This region of the vast building provided storage for a huge, fiery factory into which the two men now emerged.

The chaotic factory chamber could have been called a smithy or a foundry, though such terms did no justice to the scope of the nightmarish clamor. A jungle of machines clanged and thrummed and ground away amid the roar and flash of hundreds of fires. Smoke tumbled through the air. Molten steel pulsed around a labyrinth of stone conduits, like blood vessels pumping a ghastly yellow light. The entire, mountainous chamber crashed with animation. Huge bellows groaned. Giant pistons stomped in rhythm. Enormous gears gnashed hungrily. The mechanical din was furious. Even the scalding air itself was violently percussive.

Montenegro retreated under the hood of his cloak to conceal his face from the factory workers. Consisting of both humans and Juka, the army of workers used rakes and hammers to tend the liquid steel. Their faces were masked with soot, their skin metallic with sweat. Every one of them was bald and solidly muscled. Yet these workers did not hold the

knight's attention. His gaze was drawn instead to other faces in the chaos, faces unturned by fatigue or exertion. Their eyes gaped blankly, unheeding of the sparks and the clamor. Their mouths spoke no words. These were Blackthorn's tech drones, part men and part apparatus, part flesh and part gearworks, bodies and machinery tinkered together to create living factory tools. Most of the drones were small and mobile, equipped with pneumatic arms or pincers for manipulating white-hot metal. Others were monstrous, as large as trees, with furnaces in their gullets and multiple limbs acting like cranes. At a glance they appeared as gigantic spider-shapes made of wheels and rivets and girders. Montenegro found himself reluctant to turn his back on them.

The grotesque sight of the drones brought a tightness to his gut. In the presence of such horrors he had difficulty reconciling his new alliance with the Technocrats. Blackthorn wrought unforgivable abominations with his foul engineering. Montenegro did not enjoy the thought of risking his life in defense of such atrocity.

Yet he reminded himself that Logosia was a victim of the same conspiracy that threatened his own home of New Britannia. The two nations had been goaded into an unnecessary conflict. Warlord Bahrok of Jukaran was the relentless catalyst, the most active member of the Pact of Four that was determined to guide the war to its bloodiest conclusion. And General Nathaniel of Britain had personally betrayed Montenegro's trust. Lector Gaff had been correct, of course. Such an insult could not be forgiven. Montenegro was not acting in defense of Logosia, but rather they joined together against their common enemy. In his heart he fought out of loyalty to New Britannia herself.

The proud name of Montenegro afforded him no other desire.

He followed the Mathematician through a wide doorway. The smaller room beyond was choked with heat and smoke. Several vats of molten metal seethed along the wall. Another robed silhouette met them in the gloom. Beneath a wide cowl, Sister Raveka's skin was as smooth and unblemished as white porcelain, shaped into handsome features under a stream of black hair. Her brown eyes stared forward. She did not acknowledge Montenegro's presence. She and Gaff exchanged a musical chant, which served as a greeting among their sect.

The tattooed Lector bowed his head to Montenegro. "Sister Raveka will prepare you for infiltration. You and I shall meet again this evening to discuss the further course of our endeavor."

The knight paused. "I thought we were going to make our plans now."

"I have business in Logos. When night falls I shall be ready to discuss strategy. Good day to you."

Montenegro frowned, but relaxed once Gaff had departed. The Lector's mood was indulgent, to have left him and Raveka alone. He glanced at the young Mathematician. She was watching the metal door. Her brow pinched with concern. In a soft tone she asked, "How did Khyber's test go?"

The knight shrugged as he doffed his cloak. "How else could it go? I jumped through Khyber's hoops. Neither he nor I revealed our true skills. We sniped and insulted each other like children, as fighters will do. I am now convinced that I can kill him if the need arises. He is convinced of the reverse. I think we shall work together just fine."

She tilted her head. "Are you sure something hasn't gone wrong?"

He grimaced at the clang of the unwholesome factory. "There is a great deal wrong in this museum of horrors, but nothing that isn't obvious. Why?"

"I have never seen His Excellency so upset before."

"I have seen corpses more agitated than Gaff."

"No, he fears something. I can see it plainly. That should not be."

The knight shrugged. "He doesn't trust me. He risks a lot by working with a dangerous enemy. And he might be a little concerned about the invasion, or have you forgotten about that? In a few months' time Warlord Bahrok and General Nathaniel will be knocking on the doors of this very building, unless you and I and Brigadier Khyber can turn them around before then. To that end, my dear, do you mind helping me out of this armor? It's served me through many campaigns and it is due some respect."

Raveka paused for a moment longer, then took the helmet from him. Without meeting his eyes she carried it to a vat of molten iron. He blinked when she dropped it inside. The liquid flared, sputtered, and drank in the helm.

Montenegro watched as she returned. Even though she wore a Mathematician's raiment, he saw only her long, athletic body, draped as it should be in the exquisite gown of a New Britannian noblewoman. Many weeks earlier Raveka had vowed to forsake the Order to be his lady. She claimed that she did not belong in Logosia anymore. But her present, stoic demeanor belied the sincerity of her oath.

He tried to catch her eyes. She ignored him as she reached for the buckle of his gauntlet. In a quick motion he grabbed her wrist and yanked her close to him. He glared at her,

quelled her struggles, until the mask of the Mathematician slipped. The woman who stared back was frightened and defiant. She neither submitted to him nor rebuffed him, but faced him with eyes alight. This was the Raveka behind the masquerade, the one he had worked to reveal.

"You will not quit me," he said, then let go.

Her mood calmed with practiced speed. "We shall not see each other after today," she commented as she unfastened his steel gauntlets.

The knight furrowed his brow. "Gaff is sending you back to Britannia so soon? We haven't been here for two days."

"Lord Gideon is vulnerable to my suggestions. He has fallen in love with Lady Aria. I cannot delay my return if I hope to persuade him against invasion. The equations are clear in this regard."

Montenegro stretched his arms as she peeled off his chestplate. "Your equations are notoriously unsympathetic. I had hoped to spend more time with you before then."

Sister Raveka did not reply. Methodically she deposited each piece of armor and each garment of underpadding into the vats of molten metal. Warm steam and smoke rose from them, which felt oddly pleasant on Montenegro's bare skin. He raised his arms to enjoy the sensation while Raveka undressed him, until a single article remained on his body. It was a gold pendant hanging from a sturdy chain. When she reached for it, he pushed her fingers away. "No. I'm keeping this."

"Disguise is the sum of details. You must wear nothing that is not Logosian."

"I do not care. I will not surrender this."

She peered at the necklace. "Your family crest?"

He nodded, lifting the chain to show her the pendant. It

depicted a heart seized by a dragon's claw. "My grandfather's crest. I've lost everything else now, my home, my life, but Sir Lazaro shall always be my companion. I inherited his legacy. I must honor his legend."

She sighed and caught his glance. "You are not your grandfather, Gabriel."

"No, but one day I intend to be somebody's grandfather."

A smile trickled across her lips. "So you must," she answered, then took his hands.

The door scraped open and a figure entered on a carpet of steam. The legless tech drone floated several inches above the floor, carried by a small levitant engine. The whirl of gears and the chop of propellers comprised the creature's only noise. Its spidery pincers clamped around one of the vats of molten iron, then hoisted the massive container from its support and hauled it out of the room, into the factory beyond. The iron door clamped shut behind it. The drone had never noticed Raveka or Montenegro.

The Mathematician chuckled. "They're very diligent now, hey? They're making more drones for the war. I have to confess, they are adorable when they're children. The alchemy makes them grow up too fast, though."

Montenegro blanched. His stomach hollowed at the thought of drone children. Abruptly he felt his nakedness. He cupped the back of Raveka's neck, clutching her raven hair. "We're leaving this place the instant the war is over. We shall live in my manor at Cove. The Royal Senate will chastise me for faking my death, but my heart can bear the shame. I shall give you a wholesome life, Raveka."

She smirked. "You are very confident of yourself."

"I am not being sentimental. New Britannia is your home now. You return there as a citizen, not as an enemy. Remem-

ber that fact when you conduct your espionage upon Lord Gideon. It is the Pact of Four you want to defeat, not the New Britannian army. Is that clear?"

Raveka squinted. "I know what I must do, Gabriel."

"Be sure of that, my dear. I don't want to learn that you've engaged in sabotage as well as seduction."

She twisted her neck, pulling away from his grip. "Which one would upset you more, hey?" She crossed the room and lifted a bundle from a shelf. Unwrapping it she revealed a collection of Logosian garments. Leather and buckles highlighted in the red glow of the vats. She picked through the clothes for a moment, then handed them to Montenegro with a sigh. "I am your lady. That much is done. But you must allow me time to adjust. It's not a simple thing to leave your life behind."

Montenegro held up a long, full coat of grey leather. The Logosians wore them even in the summer, to ward off the storms of rancid dust that polluted this factory town. Here in Junction he would make a temporary home. For six months he had fought the Technocrats and now he would serve beside them, under the gaze of Lector Gaff. Everything had changed. His warhorse was a continent away, his magic sword had returned to its home, his armor was even now being reforged into mechanical drones. In the green hills of Britain they were erecting him a tomb.

He clutched the pendant around his neck and murmured, "The Virtues guide us when the path is dark, and Sacrifice most of all. Sometimes Sacrifice is the greatest weapon we have. That is a cruel truth."

The factory clamored around him as he slipped into the Logosian clothes. Sister Raveka studied every motion he made. She hardly uttered another sound. Montenegro had

the impression that she was indulging in the moment, as if this were the last time she would ever see him again. When Brigadier Khyber reappeared to take him away, Raveka resumed her stoic demeanor. She left him with a quiet glance and a whisper: "Some things are immune to Sacrifice." The comment darkened his mood, though his bizarre surroundings were so oppressive that he maintained his silence.

When Raveka was gone the brigadier remarked, "She is solace to the eyes, isn't she? Cold as glass, too, by the look of it."

Montenegro gave no response as he pulled on the overcoat.

"Don't roll with a Mathematician," warned Khyber. "They don't know their own emotions. I speak from experience."

The knight grumbled, "I'm not interested in your experience. I am here for war and nothing else. Let's get out of this pit. I want to talk tactics as soon as we can collect some privacy."

"We can't make plans until Lector Gaff comes back from Logos."

"To hell with Gaff. He can catch up when he returns."

Khyber pursed his lips, as if suppressing a grin. "You have much to learn about handling Technocrats. But no matter, we'll have privacy where we're going. Brother Barghast, my chief tinker, has offered to lodge you in his workshop. You can train with our equipment there. You'll enjoy this part, Sir Gabriel. It's time to put away the toys of New Britannia and learn the weapons of a real warrior."

The knight shook his head as they walked onto the factory floor. "The heart and the mind are the only true

weapons. Everything else is embellishment. If Blackthorn understood that, maybe you wouldn't need my help."

Khyber chuckled. "Lighten up and look around. This is the real world. This is Logosian magic."

Montenegro disregarded the statement. He quickened his pace to put the factory and its horrors behind him.

The evening descended with unnerving calm. Beneath an overcast sky of purple and orange, Khyber led him through the dingy streets of Junction. The town was a chorus of mills and manufactories performing a symphony of smoke. Swirls of dust adhered to Montenegro's coat in a strange, oily fashion. Gusting fumes turned his breathing shallow. He moved among a listless stream of dark-clad natives, comprised of humans and Juka and occasional mechanical shapes that smelled of burning oil. Rarely did anyone acknowledge his presence. The mood of the town was hard and somber. Above it all loomed a dark grey silhouette in the clouds, the spectre of mighty Logos fixed in the heavens like a giant, unblinking eye.

Montenegro stared up at the floating city, his vision watery from the dust. Absently he thumbed his golden pendant and thought, *Guide me in the footsteps of Virtue, Grandfather. I have walked into the mouth of the dragon. I can hear the roar of its hunger. But I am hungry, too, Grandfather, and in the name of New Britannia I'll take what I must until the Virtues are satisfied.*

Overhead the city of Logos crouched in the sky like a phantom of girders and rivets. It was an animated thing, a mindless clockwork titan chained to the earth by steel tethers, shrouded by an ocean of roiling, muddy smoke. Lifts and air carriages, tiny by comparison, transported goods and

men from the surface. A constant thrum shook the surrounding air, like monstrous heartbeats or great, sleeping breaths.

Within Logos, a single tower reached above the forest of smokestacks. The edifice floated freely, itself tethered to the bulk of the city by an enormous, black chain. It was a place rarely visited by Logosians, who feared it as much as they worshiped it. At the center of that mechanical fortress echoed the lair of a solitary god.

Somewhere inside was a large chamber that resonated a clear, metallic tone, as if the walls themselves sang incantations. The iron-plated floor vibrated with the sound. The only light in the room drizzled through a vent in the ceiling, chopped into slivers by a wide, torpid fan. The pale glow oozed across riveted walls. A garden of smoke drifted from the vent as well, of abrasive smells and textures, dispersing into a languid, ambient haze. The chamber was bare of furnishing and décor, naked in its sonorous calm.

A tall Mathematician stood motionless in the center of the floor. A grey hood masked his features, except for the stern mouth and pointed chin that emerged from the blackness. His jaw was covered with tattoos. His hands were clasped at his waist, unseen in the volume of his sleeves. His breathing, though steady, was a fraction more shallow than might be expected of a disciplined Lector.

"Gaff," called a voice that hummed with the resonance of the room. Its tone was rolling, perfectly pitched. It sounded from a thicket of shadows the Mathematician could not penetrate. "Lector Gaff. My artful Lector Gaff. I must kill you for coming here. I hope that doesn't embarrass you. There are rules, you see, which I wrote myself. Only my Chosen may speak to me unbidden."

The Lector bowed his head and murmured, "Your Eminence, I am prepared to accept the punishment due me for this trespass. I am of the Machine and cognizant of its orders. But first I beseech Your Eminence to hear the dire information that I surrender my life to deliver, for it concerns Your Eminence's own safety and indeed, the security of all Logosia."

The voice answered, "There is no difference between the two. You are presumptuous to imply otherwise. Yet you do nothing without a reason, do you, Gaff? I have watched you. You have spent your entire career perfecting the craft of intrigue. And now you have succeeded. You have intrigued me. It is a genuine pity to have to tear you apart." A shape moved in the darkness. Among slices of smoky light the Lector glimpsed an apparition of flesh and iron. It hovered like a factory drone several feet above the floor. It possessed a man's body, or parts of one, lodged among clumps and accretions of jagged machinery. Half of a human face regarded Lector Gaff, and half of something meant to look like a face. One eye glowed as red as a furnace. A massive, articulated claw flexed its long digits, whispering a dull, greasy sound.

Blackthorn wore machines like a tattered garment, or perhaps the reverse was true. When the shadows cloaked the Techno-Prophet once more, Lector Gaff did not look again. He had never grown comfortable with the sight of his master. He spoke quickly, before Blackthorn could approach. "Your Eminence, there is a traitor among us. He is Lector Sartorius of the Theorists. Your Chosen. He plots to deliver Logos into the hands of our enemies."

The Techno-Prophet commented, "You are mistaken. Cogs do not plot. They simply function or they do not."

"Lector Sartorius engages in a plot that he has named the Pact of Four. His accomplices are Warlord Bahrok, General Nathaniel and Chamberlain Kavah of the Meer ambassador's entourage. By allowing the Garronites and New Britannians to conquer Logosia, Sartorius seeks to undermine Your Eminence's power. I have calculated the threshold—"

"Time is measured by teeth on a gear, not by sand in a glass. That is how it must be."

"Your Eminence, I have calculated that if the invaders reach Junction, the probability is high that Logos will also fall. Your Eminence will be forced to parley—"

A loud screech ripped through the air, startling the Mathematician. In the gloom he saw Blackthorn's steel claw gouging a mark into the armored floor, scooping up a curl of iron. The action seemed casual, as if the Techno-Prophet had grown bored. "Lector Gaff, let me tell you a story with a happy ending."

"Your Eminence?"

"Once there lived two wizards who became the best of friends. One of them was a king and the other a baron. Each one used his magic to improve the lives of the people of Sosaria. One day the king said, 'The path to happiness lies in Order. Only in a structured, lawful society will the people be content.' The baron replied, 'But every man must be free to pursue his own destiny. Only through Chaos will the people be fulfilled.' The two wizards did not agree, and yet they remained friends. That is, until the day came when the king discovered a spell that would remove all Chaos from the land and secure the reign of Order in Sosaria."

Lector Gaff knew the story of the Cataclysm. The Lost King was the ruler of New Britannia and the baron was Blackthorn himself. Gaff opened his mouth to interrupt, but the

Techno-Prophet's rumbling voice overwhelmed him. "The baron knew he must stop his friend from perpetrating the spell. A great sadness fell between them, for the two men had become enemies. And so each wizard raised a great army, one to safeguard the Ritual of Order and the other to disrupt it. When the two forces clashed, the universe could not withstand the fury of the battle. The world was torn to pieces. The king vanished in the conflagration and the baron was exiled to a faraway land. But there in the desert, the baron discovered the solution that might have saved his friend and his world."

"Your Eminence was revived by the Prime Overlord here in Logos," said Gaff quickly. "I am aware of the history of our nation, Your Eminence. Sartorius—"

"It was not the Prime Overlord who saved the baron. The Overlords were pawns. Servants of a greater whole. It was the Machine that rescued the baron from the blackness that had consumed his body and soul. Though he learned it too late, the baron discovered that the Machine is the ultimate reconciliation of Order and Chaos. For all life is born lawless. Chaos resides in the blood. But the Machine brings Order to the flesh, the Order that resides in iron and steel. The Machine weaves the two forces together. And so the baron embraced the Machine and brought it to his followers, for in the Machine dwelled the memory of the Lost King, the ghost of a fallen friendship. The Machine is harmony. The Machine is unity."

The Mathematician disliked Blackthorn's riddles. He sorted through the Techno-Prophet's words. "Your Eminence suggests that Lector Sartorius represents Chaos? And the Machine will subsume his treachery."

"One wheel turns another. You have come to me, have you not?"

"I have come to request that you punish Lector Sartorius. We must not allow him to destroy our nation."

"There is no danger."

Gaff squinted. "May I inquire what Your Eminence means?"

Something like a metallic chuckle rang from the gloom. "You know, I miss hunting. Do you hunt, Gaff?"

The Lector swallowed his frustration. "Not as such, Your Eminence."

"The best thing about hunting is the hounds. A good huntsman does not interfere when the hounds fight for dominance. In the end, all that matters is the dead fox."

Gaff closed his eyes and nodded. "Then I must deal with Lector Sartorius without Your Eminence's aid. Please forgive my impudence. My concern for Logosia impelled me to seek your counsel."

"I am touched, Gaff. Truly. You have earned my respect in coming here. But as I said, my welfare and that of Logosia are the same. As long as I am unbeaten, Logosia is unbeaten. And there is something you do not seem to understand, something that will calm your troubled thoughts." Blackthorn's claw flashed in the gloom. Lector Gaff flinched. "Logos shall never fall, Gaff, because I am greater than my enemies. I am greater than the Garronites, greater than the New Britannian wizards, greater even than the Matriarchs of Ishpur. I am certainly greater than Lector Sartorius. I am an undying spirit. Let them come to my doorstep if they can. Let them massacre the Technocrats. If every Logosian dies, I shall remain. I am the Forge and the Furnace. I am the Guardian of the Machine. Through me, Logos is immortal. That is the comfort I offer you and that is all you must rely on."

Gaff bowed his head. "As you say, Your Eminence. We are all weapons of the Machine. Respectfully, then, I go to attend the defense of Logos."

"Logos itself is my weapon," said Blackthorn, "and there are still more defenses in Junction, below us."

"Indeed? I am not aware of any, except for the troops there."

"They are ancient defenses built by the Overlords. Sartorius knows of them. Seek your answers from him."

Lector Gaff bowed again. "Thank you, Your Eminence. I shall do so. With your permission, I take my leave."

When the Lector turned his back on the monarch, Blackthorn murmured, "You've forgotten something."

"Your Eminence?"

"I must kill you for coming here. Only Sartorius may give you permission to do so. The authority of the Chosen must not be spurned."

Gaff nodded. "I am at your service. Summon me at your convenience and I shall submit to my punishment."

A hard, gurgling noise erupted from the shadows. Lector Gaff realized it was the machine half of Blackthorn, laughing. "As you say, Gaff. The next time you visit me, I shall tear out your heart. You are, I think, too clever for my comfort."

The Mathematician bowed in acknowledgment, then moved to the nearest wall and turned the wheel that activated the door. It hissed steam as it slid aside, and again as it closed behind him.

Gaff disregarded the Janissar guards who waited in the corridor. His eyes grew stony as he pondered the exchange with his lord. The mad Techno-Prophet was uncommonly lucid today. Because of that fact, the Lector had taken more from the meeting than his calculations had predicted. He

had secured Blackthorn's tacit approval to bring down Sartorius. It was a legal foundation upon which to build. The mention of ancient defenses under Junction was a boon Gaff had not expected, but he intended to learn more. Blackthorn spoke in riddles, and yet he harbored an agenda that might serve Gaff's purposes. The Mathematician would decipher that mystery in time.

The Lector pressed on through the halls of Blackthorn's Citadel amid the thrum of Logos' vast machines, which marked a smoky rhythm in the bleak Logosian sky.

A dozen spark lanterns illuminated the tall cement room. In the furtive blue light, Montenegro examined a steel creature walking toward him. It stood as black as opal on four large hooves. Its body was stout and artistically curved, with a proud arch to its neck and a head sculpted to convey both menace and beauty. Its skin was a mosaic of black metal plates that slid together organically as it moved. Its tail recalled a dragon's, spiny and serpentine. The strange mechanical horse emitted whirs and hums in a gait that mimicked a flesh-and-blood stallion so methodically that it chilled the knight. He could not look away from its dull, red eyes.

"A beautiful mockery of a horse," he frowned, crossing his arms. "Do you expect me to ride this armored puppet?"

Brigadier Khyber raised a palm. The clockwork horse halted, utterly motionless. The soldier replied, "Unless you intend to walk to the battlefield."

"I should prefer to travel the same way as the rest of your men."

"We use kite skids. They take months to learn. You need something else in the meantime. This automaton is extrava-

gant but at least you can master it quickly. It rides very much like the real thing."

Another man added, "As much as I was able to estimate, at least, with very little firsthand experience." The speaker was a middle-aged Juka wearing the robe of a Mathematician. His horns had a peculiar twist to them. Brother Barghast was Montenegro's host in Junction, in whose exotic workshop the knight had taken lodging. The mechanical creature was Barghast's creation. He talked about the machine in the dry tones common to his sect. "Why are you reticent, Sir Gabriel? You are responsible yourself for this particular piece. The city's master merchants are fascinated with the exploits of your cavalry. Many of them have commissioned mechanical horses from myself and others. What you see before you is the culmination of six months of refinement. I was preparing to offer it for bids when His Excellency told me that you had joined the brigade. I realized immediately that it would be ideal for your quick assimilation. And so, at some financial loss, I am giving the construct to you."

In the context of this Technocrat workshop, the offer repulsed Montenegro. The high chamber appeared to him like the mechanical equivalent of a slaughterhouse. The walls and ceiling were draped with half-completed automata, their metal bodies laid open to expose entrails made from gears and wheels and slender chains. Limbs were stacked in one corner, heads in another, while the bodies were suspended by hooks that dangled from the rafters. Mostly animal shapes lay in pieces around the shop. Two or three had an almost human outline, though, or would if assembled. They were roughly the size of a child. Montenegro grimaced at the sight. He approached the steel horse

and mumbled over his shoulder, "Your generosity is a credit, despite your unseemly engineering. However, a knight on horseback, mechanical or not, is going to be conspicuous. You seem to have forgotten that I am in hiding. If the Pact of Four finds out I'm here, your brigade will attract more attention than you want."

Khyber shook his head. "Few will even see you. The brigade strikes quickly. We're shock troops. Night fighters. We attack from surprise. Lector Gaff has created a fog of misinformation to keep it that way. Besides, who would suspect it's you? Sir Gabriel Montenegro is dead, right? His corpse lies at the bottom of the ocean, according to Thulann of Garron herself."

"So I have heard, though he was always difficult to kill." In a swift motion he mounted the automaton. Its body felt more supple and organic than steel ought to. He disliked the sensation, precisely because it was so comfortable. "But I have scars to prove my own incompetence at subterfuge, so I'll defer to Lector Gaff's expertise. That is, of course, provided that we take the battle to Warlord Bahrok as quickly as possible. He is the Pact's real weapon. Without him, their plot fails."

The brigadier grumbled, "We will certainly strike at Warlord Bahrok. By the close of this war I'll have his heart on a spit. I'm very interested in your thoughts on that particular matter, Sir Gabriel."

Montenegro opened a hard smirk. "I've had enough thoughts on Bahrok's death to fill the Britannian library. The bastard—" He swallowed his sentence when the mechanical horse reared. He had pulled the reins incorrectly, or perhaps touched some control stud with his legs. When slits opened in the creature's steel sides, he realized that something new

was happening. From the withers unfolded two arrangements of metal rods. Dark leather tightened over the frames. In another instant the mechanisms had extended seven feet on either side of him, knocking over dismembered automations. Montenegro realized that the frames were shaped like a bat's wings.

Brother Barghast jogged forward. "My apologies. I should have disengaged the vanes until the levitant engine is functional."

The knight shifted his balance as the machine dropped onto four hooves. "Levitant? Are you telling me this horse flies?"

"How else would it match speed with our kite skids?"

"Put the machine away, Brother," said Khyber, "before someone gets hurt."

Montenegro nudged the reins. The bat wings tilted in response. He waved off the brigadier and said, "No. Leave it. Let's talk, Barghast. We've got some adjustments to make if this thing is going to have combat reflexes."

"I had hoped you would guide me in that," replied the Juka.

The brigadier chuckled. "Our engineering is not so unseemly, after all."

"Even the darkest cave can yield a diamond," said the knight. "I intend to make good use of every weapon I can, no matter who manufactures it or how. I trust the rest of you agree with that sentiment, because I have arranged to bring some weapons of my own here."

"Intriguing," said Khyber, "though I'm not sure Lector Gaff will approve."

A deep voice rumbled, "I approve of innovation. We must be efficient and decisive. The odds of success have decreased

tonight." The three men startled. A robed figure stood in the workshop where no one had been an instant before. Lector Gaff had entered without a sound. "We stand alone against the Pact of Four. The Techno-Prophet will not take action against Lector Sartorius."

Montenegro winced. "Are you sure? Blackthorn told you that himself?"

"Of course not. No one but the Chosen may attend His Eminence unbidden. Nevertheless we cannot rely upon his assistance, and so we must not delay in perpetrating our own strategy."

"You speak to my very heart," said the knight, who smiled as he leaned forward on the black, steel beast. "I have no stomach for waiting. Tonight we plan. Tomorrow we start training. In two weeks' time we can make our first strike."

Lector Gaff blinked and replied, "The equations are more complex than that, but your intentions are correct. The Pact of Four has constructed its schemes. We must show them that precisely concerted action can destroy what two years of treachery creates. We shall be swift, gentlemen, and surgical."

Khyber and Barghast grunted their approval. Montenegro did likewise. As he dismounted the clockwork steed, his body felt charged with energy. Though darkness pressed from all sides, he breathed freely again. Warfare was his preferred condition. The Pact of Four dominated his contempt. He had traded everything to be here at this moment and the sensation was exquisite.

Though perhaps, came a quiet thought, he had traded little of real value. He carried the Virtues inside him, and his grandfather's honored legacy. Everything else was expend-

able resources. Whether that served the Virtue of Sacrifice he did not have the time to consider, as the four men converged on an empty table and unrolled a map of Logosia. In the buzzing glow of twelve spark lanterns they began to design their revenge. They spoke of blood and ambush and of their common, simmering hatred.

3

Encounter at Cove

Dark shapes moved through the twilight forest as Sister Raveka descended on her carriage. The flying machine nestled into a familiar rock crevice in the side of a large hill. Shadows swallowed the vehicle. A loaded bolt thrower perched in the Mathematician's hand. She dismounted and scanned the terrain.

The trees of New Britannia welcomed her with the flutter of leaves. The breeze was laden with the smells of mud and moss and damp bark. Raveka inhaled deeply. This country was a glory to the senses. Her heart lifted at its greeting. But New Britannia sheltered many unsavory species of men, as well, one of which was stalking this black forest in considerable numbers. She smelled their reek, too, filthy and sour. Unmistakably orcs. The savage creatures had been on the move several weeks earlier, when she and Montenegro had departed for Logos. In the knight's absence, they appeared to have overrun his estate by the dozens. Traversing the grounds would be dangerous. Orcs were not clever, but when they found a victim their attacks were ferocious. Raveka draped a camouflage tarp over the carriage, strapped

on a traveling bag and set out for the manor house. In the dusk her grey-cloaked shape vanished.

As she moved through the darkening forest, a warm memory rose inside her. These were the paths she and Montenegro had walked while getting to know each another. Here they had developed the persona of Lady Aria, Montenegro's distant relative and clandestine lover. For Raveka those days were the fulfillment of a childhood fantasy. She had pledged herself to a knight and had become a noble lady. She would always regard this place as a dreamland, though the circumstances had greatly changed with Gabriel's false death. The fact that Lady Aria had inherited this estate was, of course, delightful compensation.

At present she had a task to perform, though, one that would call her away from this new home. She had come to Cove only to retrieve a few papers and possessions. Then she must depart for the capital city of Britain, where Lord Gideon awaited her return. Lady Aria had begun to romance the powerful senator in the days before Montenegro's counterfeit demise. Now she would develop his confidence as far as necessary to turn him against the invasion of Logosia. Since Gideon was the lord of the House of the Lion, all military affairs fell under his jurisdiction. By seducing him, Raveka might save her homeland from slaughter.

She quickened her steps across the estate and up a hill to the manor. The house was mostly dark, except for a few slivers of candlelight peeking between the shutters on the ground floor. Someone was inside. Raveka frowned. Her mind raced through tactical equations. The intruder was probably a maid or a groundskeeper, but she could take no chances. She pocketed her bolt thrower, slipped extra ammunition beside it and crept through the shadows to the back door.

The house was locked tight. Every window was shuttered and every lock was enchanted by very old runes. Raveka was not comfortable with the supernatural traditions of this land, but she did appreciate the usefulness of sorcery. The enchantments prevented the orcs from entering the house. They would protect her, as well. That also meant the intruders either possessed a key or had used sorcery to let themselves in. The latter possibility gave her great concern.

Abruptly she crouched behind a bush. A band of orc scouts lumbered past. The creatures were larger than humans, sporting long tusks and an assortment of crude, deadly weapons. This group was loitering around the perimeter of the house, doubtless waiting for someone to venture out. Raveka kept still until they were gone, then reached into her bag. A large key was nestled within. It tingled when she touched it. She inserted it into the back door, causing a pale flash inside the lock. Then the door creaked open. Without delay Sister Raveka hurried into the safety of Montenegro Manor.

She relaxed a bit when the door clicked shut behind her, but she dared not let her guard down. She stood in a back hallway. The interior of the house was veiled in shadows. She strained to hear any noise. The manor sounded unoccupied, but her ears rang from the carriage journey, rendering them unreliable. Softly she removed her cloak, uncovering a lady's modest dress, then made her way to the nearest rooms. Candlelight flickered somewhere around the kitchen. She smelled cooked food. After a few minutes she discovered a parlor where a dinner table was laid, with a serving plate steaming between two place settings. Raveka nibbled her lip. A housekeeper or groundsman would have prepared a local dish, with bread or cheese or vegetables.

This meal was a game bird, cooked with the utilitarian technique of a wilderness traveler. Raveka noticed finger smudges on the dishes. The smell of sweaty leather lingered in the room.

Whoever was here did not belong in a noblewoman's house. She adjusted the bolt thrower in her pocket so that it was quickly accessible. She had too many enemies to give anyone the benefit of the doubt. As she moved toward an adjacent corridor she fought down a lilt of sadness. *It is a pity, she thought, to kill someone so soon upon returning to New Britannia.* The cool evening wind had made her journey otherwise enjoyable and the moons were shining quite beautifully tonight.

Cobwebs and dust haunted the old wine cellar. The stone floor and wooden vaults and bottle-heavy shelves were grey with layer upon layer of age. The air hung thick and dry. For Jatha of Ishpur the ambience conjured a feeling of reverence. Dust, after all, was the footprint of time. It was the mantle of tradition, the vindication of an enduring culture. Humans measured their era in centuries while Jatha's home of Avenosh counted its age in millennia, yet dust was the same no matter the continent, thick and frosty like the hair of a wise, old man. The ancestors smiled upon timeworn places.

As it always did, though, the mood quickly faded. Jatha rubbed the furry bridge of his nose. In a swift motion the Meer plucked a bottle of brandy from the nearest shelf, then stepped deeper into the cellar. To the shadows ahead he announced, "I've staked the bird onto a plate upstairs. You had best go up and eat before it squirms loose and tracks gravy on the rug."

Silence answered him. The wizard glanced around a corner. At the far end of the cellar was a broad niche. Designed to hold select vintages, it was enclosed by iron bars like a jail cell, secured by a heavy lock. A single lantern strewed light over the area. Inside the niche the wine had been removed and in its place, on a low, wooden bench, lay a small Meer figure with fur glistening in the light. The slender woman did not move. Outside the bars, on a sturdy chair, sat a blond, muscular human. The man wore a white shirt, neat trousers and a wiry beard, and appeared to be very lost in thought.

Jatha called out, "Did you hear me, Fairfax? I said dinner is ready. It is yet another of my culinary masterworks designed to enrapture the mouth, or at least to enliven the bowels."

"I cannot leave," replied Fairfax the Ranger as he contemplated his steepled fingers. "I am not finished."

Jatha stopped a few feet from his companion. "Finished with what? Your vigil over Shavade? You may as well employ your drool for its intended purpose. Have some faith in my locking spells. Shavade will still be here after you have slobbered over the pheasant."

The strapping ranger lifted a finger. "The vigil over my goddess shall never be complete, but I was talking about something more concise than that. She is my inspiration, you see. She has inspired me to compose a song, but it has not yet emerged fully from my innards."

"A song! And I thought I was a fearless man. Pray keep it to yourself. Poetry sings in the heart but usually screeches in the ear."

"Keep it to myself? No, this song is destined for Shavade's own ears, those wondrous, velvety mussel shells. When it is finished I shall sing it to her, though a chorus of gods could do no justice to my love."

The Meer wizard crossed his arms. "She's going to hate it. You realize that."

Fairfax shrugged. "Probably."

"All right, then. Let me hear what you've got so far. Perhaps the two of us can bolt some words to your emotions before the bird upstairs gets cold. I used some strange ingredients from Montenegro's kitchen and I'm curious to find out if they're edible."

The ranger grinned and dragged his fingers through a shower of blond hair. "Very well! Tell me honestly if I am half as inspired as our wayward friend Toria. This is what the ovens of my passion have baked:

*"You make my heart swell
A hundred miles in girth!
You impregnate my soul;
To Love I shall give birth!"*

*"You're a star overhead;
You light up my path!
The kingdom of my love
No borders it hath!"*

Fairfax rubbed his hands together nervously. "You can see how much I adore her."

Jatha realized his catlike ears were pressed flat against his head. He blinked to shake them loose. "You're right. A chorus of gods could not do it justice."

The ranger scowled. "You mock my devotion to her!"

"No, I mock your song."

"I told you, it's not finished."

"You shall starve to death before that song is ready. Fair-

fax, you did not eat lunch, if you can remember that far back. Go get some dinner, man."

Fairfax sighed and glanced at the Meer woman inside the niche. "But she'll wake up soon."

"You have several minutes before then. I'll watch her while you're gone. If she wakes I'll knock her out again with a rap to the head. I wouldn't want to deprive you of a moment of her consciousness."

The ranger smiled as he rose from the chair. "A finer friend I could not ask for, even though your taste in poetry is wanting." To the sleeping Shavade he added, "Good-bye for the moment, my goddess. You fill my heart but alas, it is Jatha who fills my stomach. Two great storms clash and I am buffeted between them."

As his companion passed by, Jatha held up the dusty bottle of brandy. Fairfax shook his head at the offer, then trotted out of the wine cellar. When the door creaked shut at the top of the stairs, the tall wizard dropped into the chair beside the iron-barred niche.

A voice from inside murmured, "How long are you going to keep me here with that buffoon?"

Jatha glanced at Shavade of Arjun. The small warrior had not moved nor opened her eyes, but her face registered scorn. He chuckled and set down the liquor. "Until the Matriarchs tell me what to do with you. I apologize if that interrupts your busy schedule."

"It could take weeks to get a message back from Ishpur! You can't keep me imprisoned that long."

"I shall likely miss the invasion of Logosia because of it. But if you tell me about your masters, perhaps I can arrange something agreeable to us both. I want Chamberlain Kavah and the Pact of Four, not a hireling like you."

The Hunter bared her teeth and spat.

Jatha tilted his head. "Fear not, then. The days will pass quickly for you."

The woman grunted as she struggled to sit up. "I'm going to kill you for this sleeping spell, Firstborn. How long since I was last awake?"

"Two days. I do apologize, but every hour you're awake is an hour you plot to escape. I respect you enough to be cruel. Besides, your only alternative is sixteen hours a day listening to Fairfax's poetry, which would be crueler still." From the air he plucked the seed of an enchantment and cracked it open in his palm. A white glow appeared. "I can get rid of that headache, if you like."

"Choke on it," she growled as she cast him an angry glare. Her large eyes were bloodshot but strikingly alert, accentuated by tiny spots in her fur. Shavade was small for a member of the Warrior caste, though her face bore the sleek angles distinctive to her kind. Jatha could not deny that she was beautiful. As an elite Hunter trained to fight wizards, she was also deadlier than he cared to ponder.

Shavade sat up and crossed her legs. Sleep had tousled her tawny hair and wrinkled her kidskin tunic. She pressed knuckles to her brow and groaned, "Where the hell are we, anyway?"

"Somewhere Chamberlain Kavah will not find us. He is not the sort of company I want to arrive uninvited."

She narrowed her eyes and smirked. "You are far from the traditions of home, eh, Firstborn? To reject the company of a peer."

Jatha extinguished the glow in his hand and reached for the bottle of brandy. "I have rejected a great many things, just as you have, Hunter." He uncorked the liquor and

sniffed. The bouquet was exquisite. He pressed it to his lips and drank a swallow. It seared his throat magnificently.

The warrior leaned forward on the bench. "Don't flinch like that. You know what I'm talking about. You're not so different from Kavah, are you? Tell me why you turned away from Ishpur."

He brushed a drop from his chin and grumbled, "Choke on it, Hunter."

She snorted and leaned back against the wall, tapping her head on the stone. "Where is my Stinger?"

"It's safe and well-fed."

"I know that. I want to see her."

Jatha planted his feet on the ground and rose from the chair. He pushed the cork back into the bottle. "Sorry, I won't be handing over your venomous pet today. However, I shall do you the courtesy of summoning Fairfax now. He has written you a song as painful as any poison a Living Weapon might secrete."

Shavade closed her eyes. "I know. I heard it just now. Please, at least grant me the mercy of a dagger. I'll either cut off his tongue or my own ears. That man chatters more than a flock of hatchling kael."

Another spell leapt into Jatha's mouth. A light glimmered while the iron bars rattled, then quieted in their mounts again. Jatha did not think the locking enchantments needed to be strengthened, but all Hunters were trained to defeat sorcery. He took no chances when he left Shavade alone and awake. Only a proper key would release her. He gave the woman a smile. "Take comfort in my friend's affection. He is as earnest as a teenager. Not every girl would shrink from the adoration of a fair-hearted man."

The Hunter sneered, "What would you know about it, Firstborn?"

Jatha shrugged as he tucked the bottle under his arm. "More than you might imagine. I recognize honest desire when I see it. You might see it as well, if you paid closer attention to him." Then he ambled off, leaving a trail of boot prints on the dusty stone floor.

In her little prison, Shavade of Arjun waited for the creak of the cellar door. Then she twirled an iron key between her fingers. "Maybe Fairfax should have paid closer attention to me." With a grin she uncurled from the bench and slid her feet into a pair of well-worn boots.

Raveka froze. Someone was behind her in the darkened corridor. She heard the woody creak of a bow and the calm breaths of a person experienced in combat. He must have been an expert in stealth and tracking. The spring-powered bolt thrower was loaded in her pocket, but the archer's missile would run her through before she could hope to retrieve it. Instead she raised her arms and stepped into the center of the dim hallway.

A familiar voice said, "I have met a great many orcs in my life, if only for a brief moment each, but you are certainly the best-dressed of them all."

"Please don't kill me," wheezed Raveka with conjured terror. She examined the silhouette to confirm his identity, though the voice was unmistakable. "Fairfax? Is that you?"

The archer lowered the aim of his bow. "Lady Aria?"

She clutched her hands to her breast and exhaled deeply. "Yes, it's me. By the Virtues, you had me terrified!"

Fairfax did not move. "Why are you sneaking around your own house?"

"I saw lights inside and I didn't know if it might be orcs. Thank the stars it was no one more uncivilized than yourself!"

"Jatha has often compared me to an orc. It is a Meerish expression of brotherhood, I suppose. I shall never understand that rabbit-eared yeti. But my lady, where are your servants? Surely you did not come here alone."

She stepped closer. "I have no servants. I shared the road with a group of soldiers traveling to Britain. They escorted me to the doorstep."

"I heard no such commotion."

She gave him a smile bright enough to show through the gloom. "We were very quiet. The orcs looked hungry tonight." She had advanced within a yard of the ranger. His nervousness was plain. He was hiding something. His secret was probably not dangerous, but her training dictated that she gain control of the situation. She reached out a hand with deliberate awkwardness. "Fairfax, good sir, would you mind putting away your bow? I feel like a fox in a hunting pen here. This is my house, after all."

He relaxed the nocked arrow. "Of course. A bounty of apologies upon you, my lady." Then he let out a chuckle.

"What's funny?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. I just remembered a conversation I had about you."

Raveka hooked her elbow into his. "Indeed? With my poor cousin Gabriel?"

"No. With an old acquaintance of yours."

"You intrigue me. Who is it? Someone from Coventine?" As she spoke, her eyes scoured his shadowy features for an answer. She had assumed the identity of Lady Aria less than two months earlier. Not enough time had passed for her to

have an "old acquaintance." Nor had she ever visited Coventine, where the genuine Lady Aria lay unmourned in a tomb. This was a troubling development.

But the ranger gave no hint of his meaning. Instead he responded, "Let us discuss the matter over dinner, if I may be so impertinent as to invite you to your own table. It saddens me to say that the fare is nothing more than Jatha's unsophisticated output, yet he cooks it with honest intentions. That should console your heart, if not your tongue."

She grinned. "An honest cook is rarely a good one, but I am famished enough not to care. Tell me, is Jatha the only other person here or shall I have even more guests for dinner tonight?"

"There is only Jatha and me to share your sup, and even so we are one too many. Would that I had you to myself, Lady Aria, for not often does a simple man partake of such a banquet of beauty as you place before my eyes right now. A feast for the highest king you are, and I am humbled to enjoy whatever morsel falls upon my tongue."

With a laugh she said, "Take me to the food, my friend! Though if dinner is as saucy as you are, we shall never find the meat." She clung to his elbow with a calculated grip, though not out of affection. She wanted to control his weapon arm. From his body language she knew that Fairfax was lying to her. He was tense, as if prepared for quick action. She would require every possible advantage if the situation turned against her, especially when the Meer wizard Jatha was involved.

They arrived at the parlor to find Jatha already seated. The furred sorcerer rose with an expression of surprise. "Fairfax, I thought perhaps you had caught a burglar, but I see that the reverse is true. We have invaded the good lady's

house and she has arrived to take us to task for it." He executed an elaborate bow. "My Lady Aria, I have anticipated meeting you again. Please forgive our intrusion here. Do allow me to point out, if Fairfax has not already done so, that Montenegro gave us a key on a previous occasion. We are merely availing ourselves of his kindness. And of course I offer my deepest condolences on the passing of your heroic cousin. Never have I met a man with like courage and skill. May his soul find peace. May those responsible for his murder find none."

She bowed her head with an appropriate mixture of gratitude and mourning. Then she released Fairfax and sat in the chair next to Jatha, who represented the greater threat. She squeezed his hands and murmured, "Please, do not speak of Gabriel just now. I'm starving. Let's fill our mouths with food and heartening words."

Fairfax set down his bow, then lifted a fork and carving knife. The implements gleamed silver in the candlelight. He raised his eyebrows and smiled. "Ah, but my lady, we do have heartening news concerning your cousin. As fortune would have it, we have discovered the whereabouts of his murderer."

She squinted. "Have you indeed!" Her shock was not feigned. Montenegro had arranged the fiction of his own death, disguising the corpse of a Pact agent as his own. No murderer existed to be found. "Who is the villain? And how did you find him?"

Jatha let out a laugh. "Not villain, but villainess. And she is currently trapped within these very walls! Might I add that Fairfax and I are blessed with a most comely prisoner, at that. The ancestors smile upon us."

Raveka did not like the menace in the Meer's face. She

had never grown accustomed to the bestial aspects of Jatha's race, despite their peaceful society. And Jatha seemed less peaceful than most. "She is here, you say? Who is she?"

"Come now, my lady," said Fairfax as he stabbed the pheasant, "this wickedness does you no compliment. You know well of whom we speak."

Abruptly Jatha grabbed her wrist. She startled as he drew closer and said, "It took us some time to remember the first night we met you, but ultimately Riona Lynch was unforgettable. Your eyes are as enchanting as any I have seen inside of a human head. So, first Fairfax and I met Riona, and then we met Lady Aria, and still we have not been properly introduced. Tell me, my ravishing Technocrat, what is your real name?"

Raveka's eyes dashed between the two men. Fairfax gazed back at her with a threatening grin as he sawed the cooked pheasant into pieces. With a gasp she murmured, "Gentlemen, have you gone mad? I am not entertained by this joke of yours!"

The ranger lifted the knife to his mouth and licked the steaming juice. "Nor are we entertained by yours. Montenegro was our trusted friend. You seduced and then murdered him. It was Captain Bawdewyn—your 'old acquaintance'—who told us about the pretty Technocrat spy who had captured Montenegro's heart. With that information even an ape-wit like Jatha could deduce what had happened. It was always your intention to kill him when the time was right, wasn't it? Just like you ordered Lord Valente's assassination, two years earlier. I confess, though, that I never expected a murder weapon to be as handsome as yourself. My compliments to the smith. Of course the biggest question remains, who wields you against us? Blackthorn or the Pact of Four? It is a rare point of contention between Jatha and myself."

Raveka conjured a scowl. "How dare you make such accusations! I vowed my love to Gabriel! I won't listen any further." With a precise maneuver she yanked her hand from Jatha's grip. Then a loud *thump* shot through the room. She found herself unable to rise from the chair. The carving knife was stuck in the seat, pinning down her skirt. Fairfax had thrown it with uncanny skill to keep her from escaping.

That was just the sort of reaction she had hoped to provoke. He had disarmed himself. In a lightning motion she drew the bolt thrower and pressed it against Jatha's skull. The Meer flinched as she shouted, "Do not move, please! Hands on the table." Growling, the wizard complied. To Fairfax she commanded, "Drop the fork and cross your arms. Do it now! Don't force me to kill him before we have a chance to talk. I apologize, but with you two this is the only way to muscle a word into the conversation."

Fairfax folded his arms across his chest and grumbled, "Another toothsome woman seeks to kill us! And I thought giving up the bottle would make me more appealing. Temperance is overrated, my friend."

Jatha groaned, "I do not succumb to temperance and look at my predicament! Yet in defeat I am vindicated. I have always maintained that woman is an inherently warlike species. Beauty is nothing but a clever feint."

"Quiet," ordered Raveka as she tugged loose the carving knife and pocketed it. She stood carefully. Neither man challenged her. She took a deep breath and continued, "What a predicament indeed, hey? Let's try to solve this, then, with some modicum of candor. You're correct, of course. I was Riona and I am Logosian. However, I did not murder Gabriel, nor did any Technocrat. I tell you that with strict adherence to the Virtue of Honesty."

The wizard grimaced. "Then one of your associates did. The Pact of Four has agents from every kingdom."

"You could not be more mistaken. The Pact of Four is my enemy just as it is yours. I plan to interfere with its schemes as far as my skills allow."

Fairfax commented, "She lies with true charisma. See the glimmer in her eyes. I understand how she penetrated even Montenegro's armored heart."

Raveka sighed. "I shall satisfy your skepticism if you do me the courtesy of silence. In fact, you may occupy your lips on that bottle of brandy." She motioned to a dusty bottle in front of Jatha. "Each of you shall take turns drinking until the last drop is finished. That should give me enough time to explain."

The ranger snorted. "I no longer drink."

"I see. I'll save the brandy for later, then, and just stick a tap into Jatha's head." She nudged her bolt thrower into the Meer's scalp. Jatha hissed in pain.

Fairfax picked up the bottle and mumbled, "Liquor, old friend, once more a woman drives me back to your company. Such is our destiny together." He guzzled a mouthful and squeezed his eyes shut.

Raveka monitored them cautiously as they exchanged the brandy, each swallowing heady gulps. Their eyes began to redden. Their reflexes would soon diminish. In the meantime she explained how Montenegro had faced charges of treason from General Nathaniel, a member of the Pact, and how the knight had contrived his own death to escape the plot against him. Even now, she added, he resided in Logosia, working with the Technocrats to undermine the Pact's schemes. She did not reveal this information out of trust for the two men, but rather for fear of them. Jatha was

a powerful wizard and Fairfax a deadly swordsman and archer. Her chances of escaping the manor were too low for the Mathematician's comfort. Even if she did get free, both men were veterans of the New Britannian wilds whom she could scarcely hope to evade in the forest. The best hope of retaining her freedom lay in winning their confidence. Montenegro had expressed to her his deep friendship with them, so she felt somewhat safe revealing the compromising truth.

In fact, if Gabriel had been present, she knew he would have been smug. Honesty was her greatest weapon now. The Virtues indeed lit her path.

When she finished the tale, her two captives looked incredulous. Jatha thumped down the half-empty bottle and mumbled, "I would sooner believe in a drunken Matriarch than Montenegro fighting beside Technocrat soldiers. You overestimate the potency of that brandy."

Though the men were more lucid than she had expected them to be, she could see that the liquor had done its job. Their heads had begun to sway. She replied, "If I wanted to deceive you, would I invent such an unlikely scenario? It is the truth. Montenegro is more cunning than his enemies give him credit."

"And you are more cunning still," said Fairfax with wet pronunciation. "We know you to be a liar, my little eggshell. A bottle of brandy does not change that fact. To be absolutely truthful, when liquor and women are present in tandem, Jatha and I have learned that the wisest course is to assume the worst. And so we must reject your very imaginative alibi. Have you prepared another one, perhaps? We are willing to listen to all that you have. Your voice, at least, is pleasing to the ear."

Raveka narrowed her eyes. "I have confided secrets that

could cost Montenegro his life. I can give you no more than that. If you lack the wit to recognize that we are allies, then you make yourselves my enemies. I cannot risk anyone interfering with my mission. I have no choice but to kill you now, while I have the advantage."

Jatha smirked. "Ah, Fairfax, the wheel never stops turning, does it? Once again our death is at hand. It has been so many weeks since the last time, I was beginning to grow complacent."

The ranger uncrossed his arms. "Women, liquor and death. One must take each in moderation and be wary of the sum of them all. What philosopher said that?"

"I did," answered Jatha, then darted up from his chair.

Raveka tilted down the bolt thrower and squeezed the firing lever. The weapon activated with a loud *clack*. The wizard toppled forward with a blossom of red on his throat. The brandy bottle thudded on the floor. It rolled aside as Jatha collapsed nearby, clutching at his neck.

Raveka felt herself shudder.

Fairfax let out a scream and clambered across the table. She swept the carving knife from her pocket and jabbed it at the ranger. Though his reflexes were slowed, he managed to bat the knife aside. Then he kicked her. Raveka's face burst with heat. She hurtled backward against a chair that upended, dumping her onto the floor. His boot swept forward again, this time bashing into her gut, which erupted with fiery pain. Several times he kicked her as she lay stunned. Her mind swam, her thoughts in shambles. She was aware that he turned away from her and cried out, "No, no, no, my friend! Not this way!"

She watched as Fairfax knelt over the bloody form of his companion. He fished a vial of healing potion from the wiz-

ard's belt, but his inebriated hands fumbled it. The vial clattered on the floor. He snatched it up and popped out the cork.

Raveka's mind filled with mathematical chants. They focused her thoughts and drove her to action. She spotted the brandy bottle a few feet away. Quietly she retrieved it and while Fairfax maneuvered the healing potion to Jatha's lips, she swatted the heavy glass butt across his skull. It thumped loudly. He cursed as he fell to the side. From the table she snatched a heavy silver plate. A few edgewise blows rendered Fairfax unconscious. Jatha lay beside him, senseless and bloody, unable to form sounds with his ruined throat.

For an instant she leaned against the table and trembled. Her gut throbbed with pain. She sipped a mouthful of brandy and set it aside for later. Then she followed a calculated plan. Quickly she hauled the two men into back-to-back chairs, yanked down a bell pull and tied their hands together. Jatha's healing potion lay half-spilled on the ground. She tipped the remainder into his mouth. The bleeding stopped. As he sputtered awake she gagged him with a cloth, which she tied in an intricate knot. Then she fetched a pitcher of water from a basin in the corner and splashed it over Fairfax's head. The ranger coughed and opened his bleary eyes.

Raveka clutched her aching stomach and sighed, "There's no intimidating you two, is there?"

Fairfax growled, "Ungag Jatha so he can heal himself."

"I don't trust sorcerers. If he can heal himself, he can strike against me. I can't give him back his tongue until we reach an agreement."

"Pray tell me what agreement I should make with an

assassin. I won't kill you if you don't kill me? Meanwhile the serpent wets her fangs with more venom."

"Use your head, Fairfax. You are tied up. Jatha is half healed. That means I don't intend to kill you."

"No, it means you want something from us."

"I only want to convince you that we are on the same side. Together we—" Abruptly she held her breath. She had heard a noise. A door had creaked somewhere inside the house.

Fairfax's eyes widened. "You didn't let her out, did you?"

"Who else is here?"

He glared suspiciously. "Someone else who may be on your side."

Raveka glanced over the knots that bound her two captives. They looked secure. She reloaded her bolt thrower as she darted out of the parlor toward the front wing of the house. The sound had come from the wine cellar. Carefully she crept through the shadows until she spotted the open cellar door. She knelt to listen more closely.

Something sprang at her. A fist connected with her nose. She fired the bolt thrower and a woman shrieked in pain. Raveka fell back as her attacker, a petite Meer warrior, threw open a shuttered window and leapt away into the dark summer night. Raveka spat a mouthful of blood, then swayed to her feet.

By the time she returned to the parlor, Jatha and Fairfax lay on the floor. Their chairs were overturned and partly demolished as they worked to free themselves. Fairfax looked up with panic in his eyes. "Where is she? What happened?"

"That was Shavade of Arjun, wasn't it? The Pact agent!"

"The goddess herself! What did you do to her?"

"I let her get away, dammit! Why didn't you tell me she was here?" With a surge of anger she plucked the carving knife from the table and flashed it down at Jatha. The blade sliced through his gag. Then she cut their bonds and stepped back. "Hurry or we'll lose her in the forest!"

Without warning the house began to shake. The floorboards croaked and swelled, then split apart as something lunged up from underneath. A long, black tentacle lashed through the air and snapped at Raveka. Powerful coils enveloped her. She tried to squirm loose but the tentacle solidified into hard, smooth granite.

Smoke curled around the room. A pair of eyes glowed at her through the haze. They belonged to Jatha of Ishpur. "I want you to stay here," he snarled as he ran out of the parlor. Fairfax was already gone.

Raveka attempted to free herself, but Jatha's spell held fast. She decided to conserve her strength. The magic would fade soon enough. While regaining her breath she sorted through her options. As a Pact agent Shavade must not be allowed to escape, but Raveka doubted whether her own skills could aid Jatha and Fairfax in the hunt. The New Britannian forest was not her element. Besides, as soon as they composed themselves, those two would be craving retribution. Meanwhile Lord Gideon awaited her return. She had perhaps less than two months to turn him against the invasion. Her primary mission had to take precedence. She resolved to make for Britain immediately. At that moment the security of the city called to her like a choir.

Brusque noises reached her ears. Someone was poking around the house. She heard glass shatter and a series of low, barking laughs. She swallowed. Orcs had entered the manor. Jatha and Fairfax must have left a door open. When the

laugh was answered by many guttural voices, Raveka strained at the granite tentacle holding her. After several minutes it had grown brittle. She cracked loose a segment and wriggled free. Catching her breath she retrieved the bottle of brandy, which retained half of its contents. It was a rare label, one of Lord Gideon's favorites, which she could make use of in Britain.

As she dashed toward Montenegro's old office, she was already calculating the optimal route to retrieve her papers and return to her carriage. Stealth was essential. The forest was full of men who wanted to kill her. Such was the lot of a spy, of course, though Raveka doubted she would ever get comfortable with it. She longed for the day she could become Lady Montenegro and live out her years in peace. The dream appeared to be impossible, yet she clung to it without faltering. There was a magic in New Britannia that made her believe anything could happen, if her desire was great enough. All she had to do was stay alive. For that, if nothing else, she knew she had a genuine talent.

4

The Huntress

Morning light sprinkled through the treetops and lit the dewy forest. A summer fog slithered across the ground. Throughout the woods a parliament of birds commenced its daily debate, filling the air with wails and chattering. In a narrow clearing Jatha leaned against a tree. He waited for his breath to return. His ears rang with the echoes of battle.

Nearby, Fairfax was collecting arrows. A few of them were embedded in soil and tree bark. More protruded from a dozen orcs who lay about the clearing in the awkward poses of death. When the ranger finished, he knelt and brushed away the fog. Through a curtain of blond hair he scrutinized the ground. After a moment he crept to another spot, and then another. His movements were informed by a patient urgency.

The Meer wizard rubbed fatigue from his face and said, "Are you sure you haven't lost her trail?"

Fairfax did not look up. "Lost her trail! You insult my devotion as well as my skill. I sense my goddess intrinsically. Her footfalls mark the beating of my heart. I know her every breath."

Jatha chuckled. "You should have paid attention to her hands, instead of her lungs and toes. Maybe then she wouldn't have stolen your key."

"The torrents of love dissolve worldly bonds. Perhaps in some deep, unconscious way I could not bear to see her imprisoned. My very soul reaches out to her."

"There's that soul of yours again, careening about like a drunken headless. It will get you killed one day and pride shall force me to gloat over your grave." He watched as his companion searched for Shavade's tracks with uncharacteristic quiet. Jatha was unused to his friend's silence. To break the calm he added, "But if I recall how this usually works, the two of you inhabit a single soul, correct? And that's why fate summoned you together."

"No, that's just a tired cliché. It's different with Shavade. How can I describe my spiritual hunger? I fall into her like a shooting star plummets to the earth, unable and unwilling to resist, wanting only to touch her or explode in the striving."

"And the end result is a smoking crater."

"Who knows? Maybe I'll start a fire."

The wizard crossed his arms. "I still think you've lost her trail." Fairfax snorted. Jatha shrugged. "It doesn't matter. She will come to us."

"Such a divine thought!"

"Not divine. Purely material. She wants her Stinger back, and this." From his shoulder bag he retrieved a small rod of black crystal. The object felt strange in his hand. It resisted movement as if it had great mass, though the weight of it was negligible. Jatha examined the rod carefully, as if it might plot its own escape.

Fairfax glanced back for an instant. "What is that little sliver anyway, to make your eyes twitch like that?"

"The root of corruption."

"I remember when she used it. It teleports people like a moongate. What's so irretrievably corrupt about that?"

"How can I explain forbidden sorcery? Let me try to squeeze it into that constricted brain of yours. Imagine that the Ether is a wall around the entire world. A moongate is a carefully constructed door, built in such a way that the strength of the wall is preserved. That's responsible magic. But this shard is more like a miner's pick, gouging out a new, ragged hole every time it is used. Eventually the wall must crumble. Nasty things happen when the Ether starts to collapse."

"Let me guess. The world flies apart like a jilted poet."

"You're smarter than your hygiene portends. Human history claims that Blackthorn unleashed the Cataclysm, but as usual your scholars are wrong. It was the Lore Council of Anjur that split the world apart by misusing exactly this kind of sorcery. After the Cataclysm the Matriarchs disbanded the Council, forbade its sorcery and sealed away its dangerous spells. But this . . ." He turned the rod in his hand. "If Shavade carried this shard, then the seals must have been broken. Chamberlain Kavah has stolen power greater than even the Matriarchs can control. Disaster is stalking us, my friend, and this is one of its teeth."

Still studying the ground, Fairfax spat a derisive laugh. "Disaster is stalking us! By the Virtues, what fever afflicts wizards with melodrama? You mull over doom like a bad cook over soup."

"This is a serious threat, Fairfax."

"So was the last one and the one prior to that. When did we ever frown about it? Yet it's different this time and not because of an incontinent Ether. This is personal for you. I

can see that. You know I'll never pry into your past, but some old wound has turned you as dark and bitter as Blue Boar stout." He looked over his shoulder at his companion. "If I can ease your burden with some word or action, it's your duty as a friend to tell me so. I'm in love, in case you have forgotten. If you think the world is in peril, let us dispatch the villain so I can go on being in love. You and I cannot both be morose. One of us has to sleep."

Jatha relented a smile and returned the crystal to his bag. "Quite so. But don't fret over Shavade. We won't lose her. She'll come looking for us soon enough." With a grumble he added, "It's Lady Aria who has cleanly escaped us. We botched that one like children, my friend."

"You saw no sign of her when you returned for our things?"

"Only a few dead orcs. She has sharp edges, that porcelain doll."

The ranger paused. "Do you believe her story about Montenegro?"

"She shot me in the throat. That diminishes her credibility." He squinted. "Why? Do you?"

"I don't know. I suppose not. She did seem sincere, though."

"By the Ar'Kannor, you are like molten glass in the presence of women. They blow you into a hundred shapes and you never even feel the heat."

"You're wrong. I enjoy the heat. If I am malleable like glass, it is simply to entice them to pucker. That is life's most fundamental vice."

Jatha laughed. "You're a wicked soul. No doubt my ancestors disapprove of our acquaintance and yet, for my part, I feel less wicked in your company. Onward then, unvirtuous

ranger. Let's find the spoor of your goddess, if it will appease your hungry soul. We can hunt for breakfast along the way. My own hunger is altogether more gustatory."

The ranger extended his search of the area. Soon he recovered the Hunter's trail. Jatha gave in to the silence. His tall ears stayed alert to the sounds of the forest. Shavade would come for them, of course, and they had to be prepared. Fairfax's devotion would not stop her from killing them both like an assassin. Jatha would have it otherwise, even if the Hunter had to die herself. He dreaded the possibility, given his friend's infatuation, but the old ways of Avenosh were still entrenched inside him. He had lost his resolve to forget them. Years ago he had abandoned his home to avoid the conflicts in Ishpur, but if they followed him here, a continent away, he would meet them as a First-born Mystic. The pride of the caste had to be defended. No other allegiances stood above that.

He stifled a frown as he glanced at his companion, who nosed through the forest like a hound on a scent. Then he fetched a small bottle from his sack, uncorked it and drank a tongueful of liquor. It burned his throat pleasantly. After another sip he pocketed the bottle and chased after Fairfax through the underbrush. As usual they would pursue this matter a single footstep at a time. That was, Jatha appreciated, one of the unique appeals of traveling through the wilderness.

The levitant engine chirred as the carriage soared above the trees. Raveka crouched in the saddle, squinting against the bellicose wind. The sun had risen high enough to pale the sea in the south, beyond a ledge of jagged cliffs. The ocean's horizon was dotted with flecks of white. They were the sails

of tall ships, dozens of them, speeding westward to the ports of Britain. The fleet that would invade Logosia had already begun to muster.

Below her the coast road curved inward. She veered the carriage northward over a vista of rustling treetops. She did not want to be seen by the ranks of soldiers who filled the road. The troops were heading toward the capital from as far back as Cove itself. She had counted thousands of them, equipped as infantrymen and marching imprecisely. They were not professional soldiers like rangers or knights. Rather they were volunteers, armed civilians, seeking glory and adventure in the war against Blackthorn. Each of them had left his home and family to join the army. They did not have the luxury to train together. That meant the fleet must be departing soon, because no general would leave volunteers idle for long.

Raveka ground her teeth. This deployment was impossible. The invasion force could not be ready so quickly. By taking Montenegro to Logosia, she had missed some critical factor in the equation. As the carriage sailed over the forest she began to rework the formulae of her mission. Though she possessed little information, her new estimates did not yield an optimistic chance for stopping the fleet's departure. And low odds, of course, demanded greater risks. She hoped she would not be forced into desperate tactics. Gabriel had warned her against sabotage and she did not like the thought of placating his wrath again. It was the only time she ever thought her love for him might falter.

"Aria, my darling, look at the present I made for you. It's a lovely picture, don't you think?" Lord Gideon spoke with pride as he wrapped a powerful arm around Raveka. The

pair stood on a rooftop balcony amid a landscape of chimneys and slate tiles. They gazed at the breadth of Britannia Bay, just beyond the city. A fiery sunset spattered orange across the waters and painted purple the sails of a large, resplendent armada. The docks were clogged with countless tall ships, a bramble of spars and masts and riggings. Many more were already under sail, gliding toward the mouth of the harbor. Most were escort and provisioning ships, heavy with weapons and supplies. Their holds were jammed with barrels and crates, forges and smithing equipment, the timbers and planks that would become siege engines, great stacks of cloth from which to fashion acres of tents; the endless transportable components of New Britannia's centuries-old military society. So many ships filled the bay that their decks became a floating island, a gigantic wooden mosaic that obscured as much seawater as it revealed. Masts stood high like a forest of winter trees. Birds wheeled overhead with raucous excitement.

Raveka had also observed countless troop carriers off the beaches east of the city, loading their plentiful human cargo as well as streams of horses and livestock. She had known the order of magnitude of the New Britannian forces, but she was unprepared for the emotional impact of the spectacle itself. Lady Aria should have been awestruck by the glorious sight. All Sister Raveka could see, however, was the horror of invasion and the devastation that this primitive horde might bring to Logosia. Her homeland was already scorched by the war with Garron. This was a blow it could little withstand.

Her gut churned despite all attempts to calm herself. The armada was already under way. Her mission had failed before it began.

He laughed. "No. We'll have to get the troops there the old-fashioned way. The fleet is a marvelous sight, though, wouldn't you agree?"

She leaned her head against his muscular shoulder. "But it's a terrible gift for me, Gideon."

"How can you say that?"

"Because it means you'll be leaving soon. I had hoped to spend some time with you."

He squeezed her closer. "Oh, my dear lady, but we shall. The moments will be few but exquisite. I promise you."

"How soon until you go?"

"Tomorrow. But tonight belongs to us."

She heaved a doleful sigh. It was not altogether insincere. "Were you able to handle the business matters I requested?"

"Exactly as your letter asked. The Montenegro estate is

now legally yours. I found a buyer for the silver mine and sent the payment to the individual you specified. However, my lady, forgive me if I say that I heartily disapprove of sending gold to criminals, and especially in such a tremendous sum! I don't care if Anzo helped the navy at the Battle of Buccaneer's Den. He is a plague on Sosaria second only to Blackthorn himself. I would rather have diverted the armada for a week and leveled his wicked pirate kingdom! I am horrified to think that Sir Gabriel had so much traffic with him."

"I do not care to investigate my cousin's past affairs. I do, however, intend to settle the debts of his estate. Honor demands it, even if criminals are involved. Money is worthless if one sacrifices Virtue to keep it. Do you not agree?"

The nobleman smiled with warm condescension. "You're a rare flower, Aria. Virtue must be wonderfully simple in Coventine. While you're in this city, though, you had best allow me to keep an eye on your affairs. Britain may be the City of Compassion, but not everyone here defines the term correctly."

"And what shall I do when you're not here?"

"I'll see that you're well attended. Worry not."

"But I am worried, about everything. What will happen when the soldiers leave? The troll king is raiding every settlement within a day of the Serpentspine Mountains, including Coventine. They've chased the orc tribes south. The Montenegro lands are filthy with them. Now half the men of New Britannia are going to sail away and I'm very afraid, Gideon. I have terrible doubts about this invasion."

"I know you do, but we have taken precautions. We would be fools to leave our home unguarded, don't you think? Enough soldiers will remain here to keep everyone safe."

"Twenty companies of rangers," said a man behind them on the roof. They turned to see General Nathaniel at the top of the stairs. Like Raveka and Gideon he wore the clothes of a wealthy courtier, though his haughty bearing revealed him as an elder knight. His long braids and trim beard had eluded the grey of age. His face lit with an unreadable smile. "Half a garrison shall remain in each major city, as well as a master sorcerer. The trolls and orcs won't dare to come near. And trust me, my lady, the invasion will do fine without the extra troops. When we muster with the Juka Clans, Blackthorn's armies will fall like wheat to a scythe."

Raveka startled at the arrival of the officer. She concealed her surprise with a curtsy. "General, forgive me. I did not mean to disparage your plans." Then she nestled into Gideon's arms. His strength lent her a feeling of safety in the presence of a member of the Pact of Four.

General Nathaniel chuckled and offered a bow. "No, forgive me, your ladyship. I have rudely interrupted your conversation. Lord Gideon, I've just come to tell you that the *Samlethe* is ready for loading. I'm having my trunks carried on board in a few minutes, if you would like to do the same."

"Thank you, General, I'll see to it at once. I'm sorry, Aria, but I'll have to meet you at dinner. I must be present for this. Protocol, you see. We're moving confidential papers on board the flagship. One cannot be too wary of spies."

She nodded and glanced at Nathaniel. The officer looked away from her quickly. She read apprehension behind his smile, though she was not sure what it meant. "Why, Gideon," she said with a manufactured giggle, "you make it sound as if there are enemies everywhere."

"One can never be too careful," the nobleman repeated,

tapping the side of his nose. "You must always remember that, my darling. Battles are limited to battlefields, but war knows no bounds at all."

They exchanged farewells and the two warriors departed. Raveka retired to the guest wing of Lord Gideon's townhouse, where she occupied a richly appointed suite. A young handmaiden arrived to dress her for dinner. To Raveka's surprise, Gideon had commissioned her an evening gown. It cradled her body lavishly and brought a genuine smile to her face.

When she was ready for dinner, she sent the handmaiden away and sat in front of the ornate vanity. Staring back from the mirror was the beautiful Lady Aria, her hair as lush as sable, her skin as radiant as pearl, her gown an exquisite labyrinth of satin and silk and jewels. Aria was the perfect future, the goal for which Raveka had always yearned. And at this moment she was more than that. Aria was a weapon to strike at the enemies of Logosia. One day she would be Montenegro's wife, but never would she forget her homeland or allow it to be plundered. Gabriel would have to forgive her that conviction.

From her bags she retrieved the half-empty bottle of brandy that had served her against Jatha and Fairfax. She uncorked it, opened a tiny metal box and tapped a pinch of powder into the liquor. It dissolved quickly. Then she held the bottle for a moment to subdue a feeling of dread. A quiet litany of numbers helped.

After dinner she walked with Lord Gideon under the bright double moons. The nobleman's walled garden became a mystery in the silver light, its pools wavering and its flowers bleaching white. Insects started their nightly chorus, a sound that was pleasant to her. Logosia had no such

music. She enjoyed its soothing, exotic drone as the sea whispered in the distance.

Lord Gideon was explaining the extravagance of Britain's social season. Though he was a veteran of the battlefield, the nobleman had been raised a creature of wealthy Britannian society, a world of formal courtships and warrior chivalry. His notions of romance were stubbornly innocent. Raveka could see that he was thrilled in her company. His affection was deep and pure. The realization warmed her.

It also moved her into action. At an opportune moment she squeezed his arm and murmured, "Gideon, stay in Britain for the season. Please don't leave me alone."

"I'll return before spring. I promise."

She smiled sadly. "You can't abandon me."

"I'm a knight commander, if you please! My place is with the army. You're welcome to stay here in my house until I get back."

"I have a better idea. If you won't stay, then take me with you."

He chuckled. "Would that it were possible, my darling."

"Why isn't it possible? Move me onto the *Samlethe*. I won't be a nuisance. Who will question the lord of the House of the Lion?"

"General Nathaniel, for one. He commands the invasion. I am only going in my capacity as head of the Silver Serpents. I have agreed to submit to Nathaniel's judgment in all but the most strategic matters."

"Then ask him if I may come along."

He shook his head. "There's no need to ask. He will not allow it."

She murmured, "I confess, I don't like General Nathaniel."

"Nonsense. That is your cousin talking."

"You don't think Gabriel was right? That Nathaniel wants your position as Lord of the House?"

He grunted. "That hardly makes him a villain."

"But there's more to it. He frightens me, Gideon. I don't like the way he looks at me. It's . . . unseemly."

He patted her hand. "Surely you're imagining that! Nathaniel is happily married."

"As if that makes him ogle a lady less instead of more." She leaned very close and wrapped both her arms around his elbow. "Never mind. Of course you know him better than I do. I'm just being a fool."

Gideon made no answer. It was the response Raveka had wanted. After a calculated pause, she halted and pressed against his body. "Stop. Please wait." She turned her face away and conjured a blush.

"My darling, what is it?"

She bent her knees slightly so that she gazed up at him, then dampened her large, brown eyes. "Gideon, I don't know what else to do, so I'm going to beg you. Please, take me with you to Logosia. Please. If you don't I'm afraid I might do something rash."

"Aria! What do you mean by that?"

"I mean this." She raised onto her toes and mashed her lips against his.

The nobleman flustered. For a long moment he fell into the kiss, then abruptly pulled back. "By the shrines, what are you doing?"

"I'm using the time we have left. I can't take this, dammit! We've only known each other a short while and my heart is galloping faster than a racehorse. And now you're going to leave me alone—"

He held her shoulders gently. "So soon after your cousin's death. I know. But you must be strong. I'll come back to you. There's no need to rush this."

She blinked a tear from her lashes. "But there is a need. Because if you die in Logosia I'll always . . ." Her lips quivered. "Gideon, I'll always regret . . ."

The lord took her into his arms. She felt him tremble. "Aria, please."

"No. Let me say it." She pushed away from him. "Let me say it or let me go."

He heaved a deep sigh. With a large hand he cupped her cheek. She gazed into his eyes and whispered, "I'm in love with you, Gideon, and I want to make—" and he pulled her mouth to his own, as if he did not want to hear her speak the words. But the passion of his kisses informed Raveka that she had succeeded. He was an honorable lord and a chivalrous knight, but underneath he was a man of flesh and blood. And tonight he was her prisoner. By morning, she knew, she would have everything she wanted.

Nighttime swelled in the thick of the forest under a humid blanket of clouds. In the crook of a tangled willow root, Jatha rested in dark silence. His tall ears flicked at a persistent gnat. His eyes half-glowed in a moonbeam. He watched as a black silhouette crept toward him, hardly brushing a twig or leaf as it passed through deep layers of undergrowth.

"Let's go," whispered Fairfax as he knelt before his companion. "She's on the move again. She can't be more than a quarter mile ahead."

The Meer wizard inhaled a bouquet of earthy scents. He held his breath for a moment, then answered, "No."

The ranger paused while slinging his bow across his back. "What's wrong?"

"Shavade. She's not behaving."

"I don't follow you."

"She's still running. It doesn't make sense. She should have turned to fight by now."

"Fight both of us? Give her some credit. Just because she's beautiful doesn't mean she's an imbecile, as appealing a combination as that might be."

Jatha sat up and flattened his ears. "Think about it. She knows by now that you won't lose her trail. The longer she runs, the more fatigued she'll get. She can't elude us forever. But she's a skilled enough warrior to lay an ambush for us. She could attack while one of us is asleep and have a reasonable chance of bagging both our heads in time for breakfast. That is what a Hunter is trained to do."

Fairfax scratched his beard. "You sound as if you're disappointed to keep your neck intact."

"I wonder what other plans she might have for it." He gazed into the twilight that hung between the trees. "She's not fleeing from us, my heart-whipped brother. She's leading us somewhere. We're coursing like foxes right into her trap."

The ranger glanced in the direction of their quarry. "A trap out here? I have my doubts. These woods are sick with orcs and trolls, who can hardly be her allies."

"True, but she is allied with the Pact of Four. Their resources stretch farther than the stink of the troll king. Listen, my friend, I say we should break off this pursuit. We're only two or three days north of the Black Goat Inn. I say if we must collide with Shavade and her packmates, let's do it on the battleground of our choosing."

"You're mad as a Jukan jester! If I lose her scent now we'll never find her again."

"We don't have to find her. We have her Stinger and the black crystal. She will follow us. That's my point."

"You can't be sure."

"I am completely sure. Hunters have a deep bond with their Living Weapons. I've dealt with them on many occasions."

"But never with one like my goddess!" The ranger sucked a deep breath to compose himself. "All right. I confess, you offer an intriguing argument. She may well be luring us into a camp of assassins or a pit of asps or a coop of murderous chickens for all we know. That is a perfectly valid reason to turn away. However, I submit that I have a far more valid reason to stay on her track."

"I think I can guess what you're about to say."

"Precisely. My heart tells me I must. It charges after her like a sprinting hound and it's everything I can do to keep pace."

"Your heart! It isn't a charging hound, Fairfax, it's a potbellied mule dragging us behind it with plodding steps. You should lay a stout lash to that heart of yours and make it listen to reason."

"Reason! When has reason ever been a star that we followed? Something has come over you, my woolly brother, and it's clouding your baser judgment. Love and lust and hunger and whim, those are the blades we use to cut our path. Isn't that what we've always vowed?"

Jatha rubbed at his eyes. "Life is more tangled than that, though I don't expect your pastry of a brain to see it."

Fairfax stood and spread out his arms. "I reject your tangles and the cowardice they spawn! And I am going to pur-

sue my goddess Shavade tonight. In response to your redolent pile of doubt I have but this to offer:

*"She makes my heart swell
A hundred miles in girth!
She impregnates my soul;
To Love I shall give birth!*

*"She's a star overhead;
She lights up my path!
The kingdom of my love for her
No borders it hath!"*

The echoes of his song chased night birds from the branches. The Meer grimaced and muttered, "A star doesn't light up anything. It's too small."

Fairfax smirked. "Granted."

"You shouldn't give birth to love or anything else. You're male, or so your prolific sweat leads me to conjecture."

"It's a metaphor," said the ranger.

"A romantic poem should never involve the word 'girth.'"

Fairfax kicked the wizard's leg. "Get up, you sour old stain. The mule is plodding out again."

Jatha rose sluggishly enough to retain his dignity. But as he trudged behind his lively companion, a weight settled on his brow. They might well continue in the blithe manner that had guided them for so many years, but the stakes were as high now as Jatha had ever seen them. The time would soon come when they must follow a more serious path. He did not know if Fairfax could accept that fact, and worse, he was unsure what to do if the human refused to see reason. Jatha knew where his own loyalties must fall. He could only

hope that Fairfax would understand, because when action was required he would not hesitate to strike at Shavade or anyone else.

Dawn blazed over the docks of Britain, hurling amber light through the riggings of the countless tall ships. The boardwalk was a swirl of activity, rattling with thousands of footsteps and the creak of wooden cranes heavy with cargo. In the center of the hubbub was a carriage in a wide clearing. Knights in silver armor held back the bustling crowd as Lord Gideon and General Nathaniel prepared to embark for Logosia. Standing before them were Lady Annabel, who was the general's elegant wife, and Lady Aria of Coventine. The couples exchanged farewells with brave faces and discreet embraces. As the two commanders turned to leave, Raveka stopped them with a shout. "My lords! I nearly forgot my gift to you both." From her pocket she produced the bottle of brandy, which she presented to Lord Gideon. "It's a splendid label from the cellar I recently inherited."

Gideon beamed her a smile. "We shall drink to your ladyships' health this very evening, on board the *Samlethe*."

Raveka waved her hand. "No. There isn't much left in the bottle, as you can see. You must save that for the day you land on the shores of Logosia. Toast us, brave warriors, and Lady Annabel and I shall toast you from here, and the treacherous oceans will not suffice to keep our spirits apart. Promise me!"

The lord nodded happily. "By my Honor and Valor, it shall be done."

General Nathaniel laughed. "Do keep an eye on this tall damsel, Annabel. She's got a poet's imagination and I dare say, a child's mischief." He twinkled a glance at Raveka,

which seemed several heartbeats too long. She sensed a vague threat in it.

Then the men left for their proud warship and Raveka linked arms with Lady Annabel, who escorted her back to their carriage. Battling the sadness of the moment, the middle-aged gentlewoman remarked, "You've positively entranced our poor Lord Gideon. I've never seen him so giddy."

Raveka grinned. "I nearly convinced him to take me along. But he was prepared to duel your husband for permission, so I decided not to press him too hard."

Annabel giggled. "Nathaniel's right. You are a devil. I look forward to introducing you in my circles, depleted though they shall be with the knights going away. Will you be staying at Lord Gideon's house for the season?"

She sighed. "Just for a short while. I must leave for Cove soon. I have an inheritance to oversee and it's crawling with orcs just now. Perhaps I can convince a company of rangers to help me chase them off."

"Lady Aria! By the lost shrines, you should stay here in the city. It isn't safe in the forests."

Raveka glanced out at the *Samlethe*, looming like a monster over the smaller ships in the harbor. "There's nothing to be afraid of here, compared to the place they're going. Blackthorn has weapons more deadly than a thousand orcs."

The remark stilled the conversation, which suited the Mathematician's needs. She had many calculations to perform. Much remained for her to accomplish and little time in which to do so.

The morning simmered into afternoon. The spectacle of the departing fleet captured the attention of the city, but Raveka excused herself to Lord Gideon's townhouse under

the pretext of preparing for the trip back to Cove. In reality she had other arrangements to make. When she was ready to undertake the next phase of her plan, she indulged in a few minutes to rest in her suite and gather her strength. Then she took out a paper and quill and wrote a letter of farewell to Lady Annabel. Her departure would seem abrupt, but she had no choice in the matter.

She glanced into the vanity mirror when the chamber door opened. A young handmaiden entered with a tray and a teapot. "Put it there," mumbled Raveka, motioning to a table beside the bed. The servant complied, then began to straighten the sheets. When the girl lifted a heavy bag from atop a pillow, Raveka stood and collected the sack. Its contents were compromising. She chuckled and said, "There's no need. The bed is exquisite already, don't you think?"

"It won't take but a moment, your ladyship."

"It's all right. You can go." She raised the cup of tea as the handmaiden turned away. The steam had a sharp, subtle odor. Raveka squinted, then pretended to take a sip. "Wait," she called out when the servant opened the door. "I'm so sorry, but will you turn down the sheets for me, after all? I suddenly feel a bit woozy."

"Of course, your ladyship." The girl moved back to the bed. Raveka set down the teacup, then untied a long ribbon from her sleek, black hair. She stepped beside the handmaiden. When the girl leaned across the bed Raveka slipped the ribbon over her neck and looped it around the bedpost. The servant let out a squeal. Raveka yanked the ribbon violently, pulling the girl off her feet and lashing her neck to the post.

The Mathematician held her prisoner secure. In a cold tone she demanded, "Who is your master? To whom do you report?"

The servant choked, "Ladyship! I don't—"

"You put sedative in my tea. I would be within my rights to strangle you for that. But you're young and probably terrified right now, so I'll let you go if you tell me who you work for." She jerked on the ribbon for punctuation. "Allow me to help you. It's General Nathaniel."

The girl's face paled with surprise. Raveka nodded. "There, that wasn't so difficult. What's your name?"

"Faith, your ladyship."

"Faith, why did the general send you to spy on me?"

"I don't know!"

"You're lying. He suspects that I know about his secret affairs, correct? That my cousin Gabriel told me everything before he died. And you're here to look for a diary or letters or some other record that might reveal what I know. Do I have that right?"

The girl rasped, "Yes, ladyship! Please, I can't breathe!"

She let go of the ribbon. The handmaiden fell onto the edge of the bed and rubbed her marked throat. Raveka sighed. "Faith, it's time you left Lord Gideon's service. We don't need spies in the household."

The young woman nodded with a fearful expression. "Yes, ladyship. I'm sorry." She took one quick step and stumbled. Something metallic jangled on the ground. She had tripped on Raveka's heavy bag, spilling its contents onto the floor. A ring of small keys lay glinting in the afternoon light. They were duplicates of the keys to the lockboxes that Lord Gideon had loaded onto the *Samlethe*. Raveka had stolen them last night, when Gideon was asleep.

Faith's mouth gaped open. She recognized what she was seeing. "Ladyship, I don't understand!"

The Mathematician sighed. "That is the saddest part of

all." She whisked the bolt thrower from her pocket and fired it at the girl, who doubled over when the missile thumped inside her breast. Raveka lunged forward and guided Faith onto the bed sheets, then reached down to select an object from the overturned bag. It was a tiny metal box. She opened the lid to reveal the same powder she had sprinkled into Lord Gideon's bottle of brandy.

The handmaiden lay quivering on her back, her bloody mouth agape. Raveka touched the box to the girl's lip and stroked her fine, brown hair. "I'm sorry, Faith. Someday this nightmare will be over. I promise you."

Raveka did not look as she tapped a pinch of poison into the girl's mouth. The desiccation was never pleasant to watch. When it was finished, she wrapped the shrunken body in the red-stained sheet and plotted the safest course to the sewers. Scavengers would dispose of the evidence in less than an hour. Raveka could arrange an excuse for the girl's disappearance later. At the moment certain appointments awaited her that she could not afford to miss.

By now the ink had dried on the letter to Lady Annabel. Raveka folded and sealed it, then laid it on the pillow for a servant to find. She stood before the mirror again. Lady Aria gazed back, beautiful and elegant. Raveka sighed, "We shall meet again soon, my dearest," and pulled a long knife from her bag. She lifted a fistful of sable hair and began to slice it off. Tears welled in her eyes and blinked from her long, dark lashes.

"Duck down!" cried Fairfax as he leapt onto a tree limb. Jatha complied, kneeling behind a thicket of vines. In the mellow afternoon light the ranger scrambled for a high perch and quietly pulled his bow to full draw. After a heart-

beat he loosed the arrow, which clipped through several curtains of leaves. Beyond a copse of trees something monstrous roared in pain. A second later the air burst with smoke and Fairfax's tree limb exploded into flames. The human dove away and tumbled across the ground, rising with another arrow nocked. He fired it and two others before a second fireball blazed past him. Then he scrambled into hiding and knelt at Jatha's side.

"It's a gazer," he panted, "though it looks different than I'm used to. It saw me but I don't think it knows you're here."

The Meer grumbled, "It knows."

"What are you not telling me?"

"It's bigger than a regular gazer, right? And just has the one eye."

Fairfax squinted. "It's one of those battle gazers from Avenosh?"

"Correct. An oculus. I told you Shavade has friends out here. Someone has sent their hound to look for us." He flexed his hands, popping the knuckles. "Let's bring it down."

"Light me," said the ranger, drawing another arrow. Jatha nurtured a spark in his palm, which he placed on the steel arrow tip. Fairfax rose and fired the missile, which spat embers as it shot through the woods and impaled a dark shape in the distance. The unearthly roar shook the trees again. Both men sprang from hiding and charged through the underbrush.

Jatha tracked the creature as it rose into the air. The oculus flew by means of a natural enchantment, maneuvering its bulbous thorax among the high branches of the forest canopy. It was a large beast, the weight of several men, with

many spiderlike limbs that clambered through the dark treetops. Jatha could not see its single, giant eye. Neither did he want to. Instead he cracked open a spell that reached into the earth below him, seized upon a clump of heavy stones and tore them violently out of the soil. The stones streaked at the oculus, smashing through its cover of leaves and branches and pounding the monster with brutal force. A gold light flared around it. Smoke filled the air. Jatha leapt aside as the oculus unleashed another ball of flame that strewed fire across the brushy terrain.

He heard the *thump* of Fairfax's bow, several times in rapid sequence. The monster howled. Then the treetops shook and many branches snapped loose, toppling to the ground. When Jatha scanned the foliage he saw a hole through which the creature had escaped into the westering sky. The two men crouched in silence, convincing themselves that the oculus was gone.

"Damn," grumbled the wizard.

"Shh."

"Do you hear something?"

"No."

Jatha paused for a few seconds longer, then stood. "It's not coming back. And Shavade isn't here either, you mooncalf. If she was going to attack she would have done it while we were engaged."

Fairfax sighed. "Hope never dies."

"Hope is closer to death now than it was five minutes ago."

The ranger slipped the bow across his shoulders as he rose. "Go ahead, tell me the bad news that's wriggling on your tongue."

"An oculus is not just another Living Weapon. It's an aris-

tocrat's war beast. Only high-ranking members of the Mystic caste keep them. Firstborn males of the Matriarch lines. As wizards they're second only to the Matriarchs themselves."

"I take it Chamberlain Kavah is one of these Firstborns?"

Jatha grimaced. "So he is. But Thulann said that he was a member of the ambassador's entourage in Logos. I cannot imagine he would be this far afield, unless the trip was extremely important."

Fairfax stomped out a handful of fires in the underbrush. "And so we've got a very powerful enemy out there, in pursuit of some business of grave importance. I pray you won't try to convince me that we should turn back because of it. The way my blood is pumping right now, I confess the lure of my Huntress feels stronger than ever."

The Meer sorcerer shook his head. "You'll be pleased to learn I have changed my mind. I agree that we should continue to track Shavade. She's probably luring us into a trap to get rid of us, so she can help Kavah with whatever he has come here to do. Well, my furless friend, I intend to stop him from doing whatever he is up to. It can't be wholesome. And Shavade is the only means we have to find him. I'll brave her traps for a chance to reach Kavah."

Fairfax chuckled. "So why the dour face? You should be pleased. We have followed my heart, as our hedonistic principles instruct us, and we find ourselves on the proper course to do good. It is proof that selfishness and altruism need not be mutually exclusive."

"Altruism is merely a flavor of selfishness. Every nursemaid knows that. But this isn't a game anymore, Fairfax, and you'd best slither your mind around that fact. Kavah is no orc to be toyed with or pretty warrior to lech. He's the force

behind the Pact of Four and one of the deadliest sorcerers in Sosaria. When we find him, he won't be unprepared. This is grave business indeed."

The ranger coughed. "I think that point has been made prodigiously clear." He batted the ashy smoke that drifted through the trees. "Let's move on, then, in case Kavah sends more hounds after us. A still fox is a doomed fox. I'd like to meet Shavade with a smile on my face and not a rictus grin."

They started off into the deeps of the forest, with Fairfax in the lead. The human scrutinized the terrain for clues of Shavade's recent passing. Though Jatha had little skill for it, the Meer found himself doing likewise. He felt as eager as his companion now to find the fugitive Huntress. It was a backward sort of synchrony, which he accepted for its own sake.

Interlude

“Sartorius, you are failing in your duties and I find myself somewhat distressed by it.”

“You must cope with the facts in whatever way you see fit, Kavah.”

“I told you, the plot is simple. The Juka Clans invade Logosia. New Britannia comes to their aid. Logos falls and Blackthorn is removed from power. It is a simple sequence of events.”

“I am extraordinarily busy at this moment, Chamberlain. Please state your complaint succinctly.”

“I have interrupted my own affairs, as well, to address this matter. Bahrok claims that your troops are doing considerable damage to his armies in the east of Logosia. He says that the battle plans you give him are no longer reliable. This is not in accord with our design.”

“It is his own incompetence that returns to vex him. Ever since he and General Nathaniel revealed our pact to outsiders, I have been struggling to maintain secure lines of intelligence. There are forces in Logos that conspire against me.”

"You assured us that the defeat of the Needle and the destruction of Akar would eliminate Lector Braun as a threat."

"Braun is no longer a factor. However, Lector Gaff of the Mathematicians controls an elite force of his personal training. I have not yet pinpointed its members. And he owns great influence in the command structure of the army. He is circumventing my designated tactics so that Bahrok cannot take advantage of the intelligence I give him. Without my help, you understand, Bahrok is just another well-armed barbarian."

"I see. Then eliminate Lector Gaff from the equation."

"If it were that easy, Gaff would be dead. But he is an order of magnitude more formidable than Braun."

"I am not interested in the details, Sartorius. Warlord Bahrok must proceed with the invasion unhindered."

"Chamberlain, I am enacting my response to the situation."

"Splendid. Then there is one more action you must perform."

"Elaborate."

"You must take the Ishpurian ambassador as your prisoner."

"You're a madman, Kavah."

"A platoon of Janissars should be sufficient to dispatch her guards. Bring along a juggernaut if it makes you feel more secure."

"Dame Adhayah is a Matriarch. Is she not one of the foremost sorceresses in the world? I have seen with my own eyes what destruction an archmage can conjure."

"Indeed she is spectacularly powerful. She is also a pacifist. She shall not resist you. I give you my assurance as a

member of her entourage for ten very long years. More importantly, as your prisoner she shall not be able to interfere when Bahrok and Nathaniel break down the gates of Logos."

"That would be reassuring, except that her capture would be an act of war against your government."

"Leave that to me. Avenosh will not respond."

"You demand a great deal of trust."

"Just as I have put my trust in you, Lector. We are civilized men in an age of savagery. Trust is the currency in which we trade."

"Keep your rhetoric, Chamberlain. I shall do as you instruct. If this action visits harm upon Logos, you know that I shall hold you bodily responsible for it."

"As you say, Lector Sartorius. As you say."

5

Kumar's Throne

And when Sir Lazaro felled the last dragon in the hellish caverns of Covetous, he stood bloody and ragged before a great wooden shrine. Inside rested an artifact sought by every warrior to brave that pit since the days of ancient heroes. It was the Talon of Covetous, the Sword of the Dragon-slayer, the culmination of the knight's lifelong quest. Though his wounds scarcely allowed him to lift it, he carried the weapon to the surface and held it aloft before his army. A great cheer erupted to honor the triumphant knight. Never once had danger turned him aside. On that day the Virtue of Valor presented Sir Lazaro with his reward.

Montenegro unleashed a howl of joy as he charged into the Jukan horde. The savage clansmen barraged him with furious blows, but his static-charged kite shield lashed back with an electric bite. The spring-mounted plates of his kinetic armor repelled the swords and spears that slipped past his shield. And the whirling terror of his chain and morningstar drove back the crowded Jukan warriors. Flames roared from the ball of his weapon, fueled by a furnace

inside the Technocrat device. His assault carved a smoking path through the Garronite formation, littering the desert sunrise with twisted, sizzling corpses.

In the dry wastes of eastern Logosia, the front ranks of Khyber's Brigade pounded through the defenses of the Jukan military encampment. Fortifications lay destroyed by advance Logosian engineers. Showers of arrows peppered the rocky ground. Two hundred Technocrat soldiers fought beside Montenegro in crisp, responsive formations, their brutal advance hastened by war machines that vomited goutts of lightning and flame. Small, mobile smoke cauldrons flooded the air with a greasy haze. A bank of drums marked the rhythm of the attack.

Montenegro admired Brigadier Khyber's offensive strategy. His elite troops had spent the night hours in a bloodless infiltration of the terrain, then ambushed their prey in the pale languor of dawn. The crafty approach required half the men of an ordinary frontal assault. Consequently the brigade was extremely mobile, swooping in and out of its missions before the enemy had time to mount a defense. It was as efficient a fighting force as Montenegro had ever seen.

He lamented that he had never met Khyber on the battlefield. He would have gladly pitted his knights against these shock troops. The conflict would have been legendary.

Instead he battled in the midst of the brigade, leading his own unit against the armies of Clan Varang. Presently his men breached the perimeter and hurried their war engines inside the encampment. Montenegro climbed the ladder of a small, wheeled tower and surveyed the smoky conflict.

Khyber's Brigade had swamped the modest encampment of a hundred warriors, one of whom was among Warlord

Bahrok's most trusted generals. Farther to the north, across a stretch of cracked mud flats, lay a much larger force of Jukan clansmen. He could see plumes of dust rising from the ridgeback-mounted cavalry who rushed to the aid of their war master. But the knight disregarded them. The smoke cauldrons would slow their charge. This action would be finished before the Varang clansmen arrived in numbers. From the south approached a single Technocrat airship, traveling low over the desert floor, to spirit away the bulk of the brigade. The rear guard would escape using levitant-fueled kite skids. Riding his clockwork horse, Montenegro would be among the last to leave. The Technocrat troops had given him the nickname "Cavalier" and regarded him as something of a battle-hungry rogue. He felt a duty to meet their expectations. He had become an icon to them, a dark, exotic fighter from another world. He swore they fought harder in his presence.

"Cavalier! It's done!" The warrior who had called out, a giant of a Juka, rushed beside the small tower on which the knight was standing. The huge officer sported exquisite kinetic armor and hefted a spring-plated war maul. The other soldiers called him "Shirron" and Montenegro agreed that it was an apt name, for in size and shape Master Enosh was the mirror image of Shirron Turlogan of Garron. His steadfast honor likewise recalled the proud warriors of Jukaran. His face was a lightningstorm of scars from a recent battle that he refused to discuss, though the loss of it had seemingly inspired him to join Khyber's Brigade. He spoke in a deep, confident rumble. "The camp is secure. We've cornered the general on the hill."

Montenegro nodded, examining the tangle of troops surrounding the central pavilion. "Excellent. Make him the usual offer."

"I already did. He chooses to fight rather than surrender."

"They always do. Where's the brigadier?"

"Organizing the extraction."

"Then what are you waiting for? Go fight the general. Or aren't you up to the challenge?"

Master Enosh chuckled. His noble eyes smiled. "The men want you to do it."

"Well, I can't. We've got cavalry on the way."

The weapons master thumped his hammer on the ground. "I'll take over for you. Go cut down that war master. A lot of bets have already been placed."

Montenegro laughed and climbed down the ladder. "Very well, since we haven't time to argue about it. Yours is an immoral people, Shirron, but I can't fault your love of victory."

As he jogged into the ranks of eager Technocrat soldiers, the knight glanced at the feeble sunrise that tinged the smoky haze. The war drums crashed out the meter of the dawn. Assault engines clanked into position, ready to help the brigadesmen aboard the approaching airship. Montenegro inhaled the sharp whiff of the battle and smiled to himself. *Forgive my unseemly company, Grandfather, but I fight where the Virtues have led me. You had the luxury of dragons for an enemy. My curse is to battle men. In the end, perhaps I may be arrogant enough to dream that my Valor outshines even yours.* He did not believe it, of course, but the thought gave him a chuckle. He had found it prudent to keep his spirits high. The arid wastes of Logosia provided a sullen environment and he did what he must to survive.

The midnight ocean nuzzled the shore with gentle, foamy breakers. The sharp rocks of the coastline glistened like wet

jewels. Whitecaps danced over the surface of the water, reaching out several hundred yards to surround a tall ship at anchor. Many rowboats bobbed their way closer to Logosian soil. Lanterns glowed sharp amber in the sheeting moonlight.

From dry land Montenegro watched the New Britannian buccaneers pull their dinghies onto the rocky shore. The men slogged through glowing spume wearing loose, rugged clothes and high boots. The tallest of them sported a long coat as well, in the fashion of a naval officer. His wide-brimmed hat fluttered in the breeze, its plumage rippling like fire. From his rowboat he hoisted a short, burly animal. The creature was a ball of white fur that capered through the tide pools as it followed the man across the pebbled beach. The tall sailor drew his cutlass as he approached Montenegro.

The knight spread out his arms and said, "Surely you would not cut down a Technocrat with breeding as impeccable as mine."

The brown-skinned buccaneer cupped a hand over his eyes, as if the light of two moons was blinding. Then he sheathed his blade and began to laugh. "By Blackthorn's gaskets, I would not believe it if it wasn't standing right in front of me. Sir Gabriel Montenegro, alive and well and dressed in Technocrat armor! And I thought I was insane coming here like this."

The two men shook hands. Montenegro chuckled, "The whole world has gone insane, my friend, and we're standing at the eye of the hurricane. But I'm glad to see you as well, Bawdewyn."

"Ain't this a spectacle, though? In Britain they're hailing Montenegro the fallen hero. The slayer of Braun's Needle.

Martyrs are good for morale, you know. But what would they say to the sight of you clapped in springs and gears with a clockwork stallion beside you?" Captain Bawdewyn examined the mechanical horse that stood a few feet away, black and motionless atop a flat boulder. "Nice. You should keep it out of the sea wind, though. The salt's going to ruin it."

"They tell me it'll withstand the elements, but I don't trust much about these absurd machines. This one will never be nimble enough for battle, anyway. It does carry me around with a certain degree of panache, however." He glanced down at the buccaneer's animal, which was snuffling the clockwork steed. It was a white bear cub, as hefty as a war hound and sloppy with sea foam. "I see you have a new companion, as well."

"Her name is Molly. She's a glory, hey? She eats enough to crew her own ship but she's a pretty little brute. A couple of years from now she's going to be an interesting addition to my boarding parties."

"Provided you can teach her to swing on a rope." He looked out at the other sailors, who were unloading barrels from the rowboats. "You brought what I requested?"

"I did indeed. Though I almost didn't believe your message was genuine. There's no dearth of Technocrats who would like to catch me in Logosian waters. But this arrangement struck me as a little too bizarre to be a simple trap. Besides, Valor breeds enterprise, hey?"

Montenegro patted his shoulder. "I shall not keep you for long."

"Absolutely you won't. My lads shove off in twenty minutes, with or without me. I gave the order myself." He waved an arm toward the cargo his men were stacking on the rocks. "Well, here's your magic swill and curse you for

making me go to Anzo for it. I can't imagine what you must have paid for this stuff. Your cousin must be very loyal, selling half her inheritance to finance your secret vendetta."

He smiled. "She is completely loyal to me."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Why do you doubt it?"

"Because I know who she is. Lady Aria. She's your Technocrat spy, ain't she? Me and Fairfax and Jatha figured it out after the battle. You know I never trusted that little love affair of yours."

The knight grumbled a sigh. "I would be dishonest to say you were entirely unjustified. But put your faith in my judgment. Aria fights on the same side we do. I have transformed her into a New Britannian lady, though you are welcome to disbelieve it."

Captain Bawdewyn glanced over the knight in his intricate Technocrat armor. "Uh-huh. Listen, I don't want to seem unfriendly, but since I came all this way I figure you owe me an explanation. What scheme are you working over here? Why does it look for all the world like you joined the enemy?"

"It is an alliance of convenience. I'm taking down Warlord Bahrok using the best resources available. That's why I need the potions in those barrels. If my Logosian cohorts are skilled enough to keep up with me, this war will be over before the Senate gets the fleet under way. New Britannia need not be a pawn of the Pact of Four."

"I admire your initiative, but my friend, you're far too late. The sails are already flying by now."

"What's that? Are you certain?"

"Certain as an itchy harlot. Why do you think I need to get back in such a hurry? I'm joining the fleet south of the

Den. I'll be leading ten privateer warships myself. Can you believe it? Bawdewyn the Beast, Fleet Commander!" He nudged the white bear cub with his boot. "Someday, Molly, they're going to wake up and remember I'm just a pirate. We've got 'em fooled for now, though."

Montenegro gritted his teeth. "Damn Duarte and his obsession for efficiency! He could be a Technocrat himself. This is all happening too fast. Do you know how soon the troops are supposed to land here?"

"Hard to say. A fleet that big won't move like lightning, but the whole trip can't take more than a month, at the longest."

"Then I have to step up my plans. I appreciate the information." He grimaced and rubbed at a pain in his brow. "You had better haul your carcass off these shores now, before a leviathan wanders this way. My memories of the *Menagerie* are favorable enough that I'm concerned for her well-being. She will be my preferred means of traveling home someday."

"If she's still afloat, I'm happy to oblige you. And Gabriel, do me the favor of relaying that offer to someone else here, if you see her. I'm talking about little Toria. You give her my love, hey? Tell her when she wants to go home, I'll sail up a river to fetch her away. And remind her she owes me some letters. You got it?"

He smirked. "I promise. Go with Virtue, Bawdewyn."

"Walk with Honor, you cunning bastard."

They clasped forearms again and the privateer headed back for his boat. The bear cub lumbered after him, splashing through the salty tide pools. As Montenegro watched them go, he growled to himself. This was disheartening news. Lector Gaff's informants had not reported that the

New Britannian fleet was at sea. No more than a month remained now in which to cripple Bahrok's forces. He and Khyber had devised a strategy based on no less than thrice that span of time. So far their actions had been successful, but he was unsure how they could meet this new deadline. Even with the magic potions Bawdewyn had brought, the odds of success appeared scant.

He needed time to think. Success hinged on strategic decisions. Gaff would have to be involved. In a swift action he mounted the clockwork horse and reared its sleek body. Batwings snapped out from its withers. The levitant engine chattered awake and the steed leapt into the air, its serpentine tail lashing to maintain balance. As he gained altitude he spotted Captain Bawdewyn waving his oversize hat. Montenegro flew above the privateer, his moonshadow falling across the rowboat.

"Don't forget!" shouted the captain. "I promised Anzo I'd find him the head of Pikas of Enclave! Bring it to me if you happen across it!"

"If he's not dead already, I shall bring you what's left after I'm finished gnawing it!"

"And watch out for shooting stars, you black-winged demon!"

Montenegro saluted as he climbed into the star-dappled sky. The other sailors stared in wonder. The boats started back for the *Menagerie* and Khyber's brigadesmen climbed out of hiding to collect the barrels of potion. When the knight was satisfied that the situation was under control, he steered his mount inland. The high wind was brisk, despite the summer weather. It helped to clear his thoughts, like the numerical chants of a Mathematician. Lately he needed the extra concentration. The air of Logosia was sultry to

breathe and too often he found his thoughts reaching homeward.

"This does irreparable harm to our schedule," said Lector Gaff in the shadow-streaked room. "We shall not complete our dissection of Clan Varang in time."

Brigadier Khyber offered, "We can narrow our focus to the coastline. If we can prevent the New Britannians from landing too quickly, maybe we can buy ourselves another week or two."

"I won't support that plan," glared Montenegro. "I am here to prevent New Britannian entanglement, not to draw them into battle."

"You are correct," nodded the Lector. "We must not involve the New Britannian fleet, if possible. To do so risks full invasion. Gentlemen, the numbers no longer favor a strictly military solution. I am undertaking certain political stratagems in Logos, in which you must now play a role. The time has come for greater stealth. Sir Gabriel, I have need to probe your personal experiences. Tell me about the Juka named Thulann of Garron."

The pavilion of Shirron Turlogan was a pageant of silver and silk. As befitted the ruler of proud Jukaran, the warrior chieftain lavished his tent with an arrangement of finery that was at once audacious and refined. Veils of intricate weave were draped and knotted according to centuried custom. Braziers flickered across a precise arrangement of idols. Not one bauble or ornament was out of place. Neither would the Shirron have noticed if they were, for though he adhered to the rituals of his society, his affairs addressed more practical concerns. Presently he had summoned a

council to the crescent-shaped table dominating the room. Turlogan sat at the cusp of the crescent, a mountainous figure with a shaven head and two stout horns jutting from a large brow. The Juka's emerald flesh was glazed from the heat of the desert. He wore a full caftan, richly embroidered.

At his side sat Warlord Savan, the chieftain of Clan Eryem, broad-shouldered and opulently clad. Behind Savan stood his teenage daughter Tekmhat, a handsome, athletic figure in the bleached robe of an Initiate of the Way. Her black hair was braided under the hood of her raiment. On her brow was painted a sigil that denoted her betrothal.

On Turlogan's opposite side sat his only son Venduss, wearing the ornamented mail of an officer. Beside him was General Fekhet, Turlogan's most trusted war master. Completing the council was Thulann of Garron, dressed in her dark Way Master's robe, and her exotic attendant Toria. A collection of cups and pitchers littered the table. A large map of Logosia dangled before them, suspended on the pavilion's center pole.

Turlogan swallowed a gulp of wine and clasped his hands together. "Very well, Savan, let us hear this urgent message."

The middle-aged warlord motioned to his daughter. "Tekmhat, please relate the news from Garron."

The statuesque teenager bowed, rustling the white fabric of her Initiate's robe. "The Way Priests have received information from Master Badralghazi of Britain. They say the Royal Senate has already deployed the New Britannian armada. Their army shall arrive on the shores of Logosia in three weeks' time."

Turlogan wrinkled his brow. "Great Mother! These humans do not tarry when they have a goal in sight. Then we must secure enough coastline to grant them a safe land-

ing. How many of our advance groups have established a camp?"

General Fekhet answered, "Three groups, Shirron."

"Only three? I sent twelve for the purpose. What is delaying them?"

The war master grumbled, "Clan Varang."

Thulann pointed at the map. "Bahrok wants to capture the coast himself. He sends his allied warlords to keep us from staking our ground."

"Has there been open fighting?"

"Not yet, but the danger is thick. He waits for us to set the first spark to the tinder."

The Shirron exhaled into his hands. "We must control that landing zone. Whoever meets the New Britannians will set the conditions of the invasion. Bahrok knows that. It is critical to his plans."

Venduss leaned forward. "Then we have to push him aside. Father, we must not back down from this challenge."

"I do not intend to, my son, but neither can I fight Logos and Varang at the same time. Thulann, tell me again about Bahrok's troubles in the east. I like that story."

"Blackthorn is hitting him fiercely in the deserts around Enclave. Bahrok is stretched thin, in order to keep his supply lines secure. The Technocrats have forced him to do so with, I daresay, mathematical precision. I believe it marks a change in their defensive strategy."

Warlord Savan nodded. "They realize that Bahrok is the primary threat against them."

Turlogan grunted disapproval at the comment. "And what about these rumored assassinations of Bahrok's generals?"

Tekmhat shook her head. "The healers have not been able to confirm it. We doubt the assassinations took place."

"You're wrong," interjected Toria, leaning over the table. "Bahrok has tried to cover it up, but four war masters are dead according to our spies in Varang. I spoke to one this morning. You should ask the keeners for confirmation, Tekmhat, not the healers."

The Jukan girl lifted her chin and said nothing.

The Shirron raised an eyebrow. "Is this true, Thulann?"

"Quite true. Bahrok has silenced the news, but I can hear the echoes plainly. The fact is, Blackthorn wants to cripple Bahrok and he is doing so in methodical fashion."

"That is a mixed blessing. Will it jeopardize the invasion?"

"I doubt it. Once the New Britannians arrive, the Technocrats will have no choice but to pull back and fortify their cities. The final push should see little resistance until we reach Junction and Logos."

The mountainous chieftain smacked his hands on the table. "Excellent! Then I am decided. We shall concentrate our forces at the coast to secure a landing zone for the New Britannians. If Bahrok wants to fight me for control, let him stretch his lines that much thinner. Blackthorn can pluck them like strings on a harp for all I care."

General Fekhet put down his wine and fidgeted his large hands. "Shirron, with due deference to the pride of our clan, I do not believe it is wise to provoke open conflict with Clan Varang. We are at half our strength. Even weakened, Bahrok can inflict grave damage upon us."

"I strongly concur," said Thulann.

The Shirron snorted. "Let him try. Ours will be the defensive advantage. We need only hold our ground until the New Britannians arrive."

The Way Master narrowed her single eye. "Defense can be a bloody game. Akar was proof of that."

Venduss raised a finger and said, "Clan Eryem has a garrison in Jamark that can come to our aid, if necessary. They are no more than a week's journey by longboat from anywhere on the northern coast."

Warlord Savan frowned. "You would ask us to leave Jamark unguarded, Venduss?"

"In the name of Clan Kumar I would, Savan, just as we would sacrifice for your sake. That is the strength of the bond between us." He reached behind his father to take the hand of Tekmhat, who returned him a proud smile.

Turlogan smiled as well. He gazed across the table at Thulann. "Come now, my dearest skeptic. Show some confidence in this old sword arm. It may ache when the weather turns bad, but it can still generate a storm of its own."

"Storms break," frowned Thulann.

"Not this one. Do not be a skittish old crow. We have suffered much, but we are not as weak as Bahrok wants us to believe. We fight in the name of honor."

"Let us hope it is a victorious sort of honor," muttered the Way Master. "I am not certain we can afford any other kind."

Outside the pavilion sprawled the seasoned army of Clan Kumar. The thronging encampment filled the basin of a red stone valley, the walls of which had eroded to form a maze of hard rocks. Under the high, jagged bluffs burned thousands of campfires, throwing light upon countless banners. The glow of the camp swelled out from the valley, holding back the desolate Logosian evening. The bustle of men and ridgebacks stirred a hot summer wind. The very rocks were alive with the clank of smiths and carpenters.

Through the tireless military clamor walked a pair of eye-catching figures. Toria was nearly a foot shorter than the

Juka who surrounded her, yet her mane of russet curls stood out in the chaos. Beside the minstrel strode the willowy Thulann of Garron in the dark, textured robe of a Way Master. Her face was grooved with ire. When her mood became too sour to bear, she stamped her walking staff against the hard earth and growled, "That rattle-skulled codger! His pride cannot accept what we lost at Akar. Kumar is not the juggernaut it used to be. Bahrok is a storm we shall be hard-pressed to shelter." She leaned on her staff and snorted. "He pays no heed to my counsel and then wonders why I removed myself so long from his affairs."

"At least he's not sulking anymore. For a while I thought he was wasting away like a spectre."

Thulann calmed herself with a sigh. "Thank the Great Mother for that. I was afraid for him, as well. It is a pity he has restored himself into a headstrong buck, though, instead of something more temperate. There are days I believe he has no more control over his passions than Venduss does."

The redhead nibbled her lip. "I am not scorched by the heat of Venduss's passion."

The Way Master glanced at her for a moment, then nodded. "He does play the bridegroom rather diligently."

"But not faithfully. He still asks me to be his mistress. He knows I won't do that, though. He can marry me or he can marry Tekmhat, but he can't have both of us." She shook her head. "But he's too much of a coward to decide."

"You are being unfair to him. He is shackled by protocol. His betrothal to Tekmhat is a symbol of the alliance between Kumar and Eryem. He will not jeopardize that bond while we are in the thick of a war."

"Then he should screw up the courage to send me away."

A chuckle formed on Thulann's lips. "He will not. That

would admit defeat. He and his father share that particular inhibition. Toria, I suggest you apply a healthy dose of fortitude to this bind you are in. Venduss loves you, but only when the war is finished will he be able to demonstrate it to your satisfaction. Surely you can forestall your ultimatum until then."

The girl watched her own feet, a curtain of ringlets hiding her face. "I'm not sure I should take your advice on this, Thulann."

"What? That is an ungrateful remark to the woman who sanctioned your affair for two years, despite my more realistic instincts."

"That's not what I mean." She brushed back her curls and turned sea-green eyes on the Way Master. "I don't understand you, Mistress. I dream of what you have. Turlogan worships you. He would give up everything if you'd agree to marry him. But you've rejected him for twenty years. I wonder if you know what you've lost."

Thulann smirked. "I know all too well. You saw tonight what happens when Turlogan and I spend too much time together. Flint and steel are not wisely marriageable."

"No, that's not true. You want to hide behind that illusion, but the reality is much less glamorous, hey? You're just afraid to commit to that choice. Admit it, Thulann. You're exactly like Venduss."

A mouthful of barbs welled up in the Way Master, but the old Juka swallowed them. She cast a glower over the presumptuous girl. Toria stood proudly in the slithering desert wind. Her long Garronite dress exaggerated the lean proportions of her body. Her freckles were reminiscent of a human child, but Toria's face was seasoned with hardship. She flinched at the disapproval of her mistress, but she did not look away.

Thulann pursed her lips. "I stand at Turlogan's side now. I shall not leave it again. That is more than he ever sensibly expected."

Toria shrugged and glanced at the sky. "That's all Venduss expects of me, too."

For a long while they stared in silence at the irregular shape of the valley ridge. The stars cascaded through the heavens beyond. Then the Way Master laid a hand on her companion's shoulder and said, "I need you to do something for me, child."

"Of course."

"An informant from Akar should arrive at my tent soon. Please be so kind as to interview him for me. I am not in the proper mood after tonight's council."

The girl blinked at the unprecedented request, then bowed her head. "Yes, Mistress. What will you be doing?"

"I think I shall take a walk. Sometimes I need to rattle these old bones a bit, to shake some feeling back into them."

The valley was nestled inside a giant bowl of rich, red stone. The impressive mineral formation rose haughtily from the desert scrub, a blood-hued butte visible for miles in every direction. The high bluffs of the perimeter were etched with deep channels and fractures from the corrosive rains that once plagued Logosia. The result was a labyrinth of rocky corridors in a ring around the valley. Thulann strolled without direction among those high crimson walls, where the sounds of the army grew muffled. Shadows streamed around her in the drizzling glow of the moons.

In the niches and corners of the crimson maze she passed many small structures of metal. They were the aged and rusty stems of pipelines that thrust out from the chiseled

rock. The pipes were long shattered and abandoned. Thulann did not know what they had been used for, but she knew why they were here. This place was once a mineral quarry. Scores of Juka had worked here as slaves in the service of the Overlords. Ancient songs recounted a time when there was no valley at all, when the great machines of the Overlords had conjured the entire rock formation out of the depths of the earth. Bubbling pools of mud supported the legend of that volcanic event. For centuries the Juka had chipped away at the fresh, red rock, until the center of the formation became a wide valley. No song or record indicated the purpose for which the Overlords used the minerals. The Juka were never told. In those days they were regarded as nothing but strong hands and tireless backs to swing tools, and sometimes weapons, for the greed of their unseen masters.

Yet the Juka did not despair in those dark, cruel ages. As a neglected race they had cherished their own traditions of honor and discipline. Spoken lore grew lush and elaborate. Ritual mitigated the drudgery of their lives. The smoke-shrouded factories developed powerful bonds of community that would one day transform into the clan kinships of Jukaran. And the highest glory for the Juka came when the Overlords warred with each other. The fury of battle, though painful and terrible, granted the slaves freedom from their crushing work. As warriors they excelled beyond all other callings, for their spirits soared with weapons in their hands. As soldiers they could destroy, in fleeting clashes, the black machines that were the instruments of their bondage. In war they could unleash their shackled rage.

When Thulann had learned the songs of recent history, it seemed inevitable to her that the Juka would rise against the

Overlords. Not even those godlike beings could bottle the warrior spirit forever. Indeed, when the Hand of Honor led the shires in revolt, the movement spread so quickly that after five years only one citadel remained unconquered. It was named Citadel Moonglow, the fortress of the Prime Overlord, impregnable even in the fiercest mechanized wars. It was the last bastion of technological slavery, the heart of the foulest monster. Turlogan's parents, Kumar and Narah, gathered the Jukan armies to strike the floating city. In uncountable numbers they amassed in preparation for the final siege. And here in this valley of crimson stone did Kumar reside in the weeks before they marched to freedom. Legend had dubbed this place Kumar's Throne. Though it lay now in Logosian territory, it was a shrine of great honor for the Juka Clans. They called it the drum that sounded their liberty.

Nor was it happenstance that Turlogan had brought the army here after the slaughter at Akar. The location was convenient in both strategic and tactical terms, but of greater impact was the effect on morale. Here the soldiers could remember the glory of Kumar himself, the first Shirron and the father of the clan. Here they touched again the foundation of their strength. The benefit to Turlogan himself was most dramatic of all. After Akar he had sunk into a grave depression, but a week at Kumar's Throne had revived him to his old, fearless self.

Thulann was glad for his rejuvenation, though she was unsure that his thinking was sound. He wanted to recapture the glory of Kumar. She was not certain the feat was possible.

She set aside her walking staff, braced her foot on a rusty pipe and climbed up one of the red walls. From a high perch

she looked out across the army in the valley. The sight was magnificent, she had to admit. Five thousand warriors dwelled in the dazzling firelight. The flags and banners adorning their tents combined in a vast, rippling tableau. On the north side of the basin camped the cavalry, with hundreds of armored ridgebacks bleating under the moons. In the east corner sprawled the engineers, their wagons heavy with elongated timbers and their forges ablaze with iron. The rest of the valley contained dozens of battalions, many of whom drilled with weapons even at this late hour. The mood of the encampment seemed taut and alert.

They wanted revenge for Akar, of course. They were proud Jukan warriors, eager to redeem themselves. Centuries of sacred tradition demanded nothing less. She felt the same resonance in her own chest. She understood their stern pride. Though her assessment of strategy reached a different conclusion, her devotion to the clan cried out for the blood of their enemies.

She laughed at herself as she sat on the ridge. Such emotions led to needless suffering. She would not heed them, nor would she let Turlogan do so. In these moments she recognized the utility of the cold society of the Technocrats. Their actions arose from strict, practical necessity. But at the same time she pitied the Logosian Juka. Did they carry the same passions in their blood? Or had they forgotten the heritage of ancient hardship? She had difficulty believing the latter, though the evidence suggested it was largely true. She let out a sigh, then sat quietly and trained her ears on the complicated sounds of the encampment.

Something stirred in the darkness nearby. She realized she was not alone. When she glanced in the direction of the movement, no one was there.

Her body flushed with energy. She noted the lay of the sword across her back, then swiveled on the rock wall and slid down to her feet. A few yards away she glimpsed a figure. She nearly reached for her weapon until she recognized the towering silhouette of Turlogan standing on the path.

Her smile was melancholy. "Have you come to apologize or to convince me you're not a brash fool? I am unlikely to be receptive to either argument, I warn you."

The black shape did not answer. Thulann tensed. She realized with a jolt that the silhouette was not opaque but translucent like a veil, showing the night sky behind it. The spectre darkened slowly, devouring the stars inside its body. This was sorcery of a boldness she had not seen outside of New Britannia. And as the figure solidified the mystery deepened, for she saw that the enormous Juka wore the finely-crafted mail of a wealthy Technocrat soldier. In his hands rested a huge mallet, augmented by a spring-mounted striking plate. His stance was ominous but not overtly threatening.

A sharp memory throbbed in her skull. Thulann lifted her chin and murmured, "Dreams of the Great Mother, it is Master Enosh of Junction come to haunt me. I greet you with respect and honor, Janissar."

The Juka materialized slowly. Thulann recognized the dwindling effects of invisibility, possibly from a potion of the sort Montenegro had once employed inside Braun's Needle. She was shocked to see a Logosian employing magic at all. Though the weapons master's face was masked by the darkness, she glimpsed a webwork of scars on his cheeks and brow. In a grave tone Master Enosh replied, "My allegiance to the Janissars is over. You forced that from me at Akar. I march in more discerning company now."

"I am gratified to have made an impact, if perhaps a bit surprised."

Behind her a man said, "You shall be more surprised still to learn with whom he serves."

She flashed her sword from its scabbard and wheeled around to face the second person. He too materialized from the thick summer air. Several others appeared behind him, each wearing Logosian kinetic armor; yet it was not the sudden arrival of these enemies that had caused her to draw steel. Rather it was the voice of the tall human who had spoken. She knew that rich, distinctive tone. She wondered if she might not be facing ghosts, after all.

"Sir Gabriel Montenegro is dead," she remarked, pointing her subtly curved blade at the human. "To mock his memory is to provoke my anger."

"Way Master, in the past you have mocked me so ferociously that I still wake at night with retorts on my tongue. Yet our hostility vanished in the sewers under Britain. I stand before you now as a friend, offering you a greeting and a proposition."

Thulann's heart pounded. This smacked of an audacious ruse. "Show me your face, Technocrat. Prove that you are who you portray yourself to be. Magic potions or no, you and your warriors stand in the midst of Turloghan's army and shall therefore live or die at my discretion."

"Put away your fangs, old cobra. I walk the path of Honesty." The man removed his Technocrat helmet, unfurling long, ebony curls like a banner in the circulating wind. Moonlight draped across familiar features. From under his gorget he withdrew a gold pendant, which glinted as it dangled on a chain. It depicted a heart seized by a dragon's claw, the family crest of Montenegro. "I suppose you will want an explanation."

The Way Master propped her swordpoint on the ground and leaned her weight on the blade. "I suppose I shall want to sit down first. I cannot articulate the joy in my heart until it stops hammering so loudly."

The black-armored knight gave her an earnest smile. They sat together on a slab while the Logosian soldiers stood watch for prying ears. In sparse detail Montenegro explained the circumstances behind his false death and his alliance with the Technocrats. When her mind ceased reeling and accepted the improbable reunion, she sorted his tale into the events of the last few weeks. "Then it is you who have led the Logosian resurgence against Warlord Bahrok. This is your revenge against him."

"It's not only my doing, but of course my new allies as well. They are quite skilled and quite angry. Now that they know Lector Sartorius is the Logosian traitor, they're able to throttle his treachery. And so Bahrok's undeserved success has come to a halt. But to answer your question I am not seeking revenge, though it shall certainly spice the victory. No, my goal is to honor the Virtue of Justice. The Pact of Four nurtured this unjust war. I am going to squelch it." He pointed at her with a black gauntlet. "And you are in a position to help me do that."

"If you imagine I might join your band and attack Clan Varang, you need to review my career. Above all I am loyal to Garron. Warlord Bahrok, despite his wickedness, fights on my side of this war. I shall not raise steel against him without due provocation."

"Thulann, you would be a treasure among these Technocrat soldiers. They are experts at warfare but they lack your singular refinement. I know better than to make that request, however, and so I shall make a more interesting

one." His armor clanked as he leaned closer. "Tell me, how committed would you say the Shirron is to this invasion?"

"To his warrior's heart, of course. Otherwise we would not be here."

"He is determined to push all the way to Logos?"

"Against my own counsel, yes. History has marked the path he follows. He hangs the honor of the clan on this victory."

"I see." Montenegro rubbed his chin. His grey eyes sharpened. "What would you say if I told you Lector Gaff is willing to petition for surrender before the New Britannians arrive?"

A tingle shot through her. "I would dread that you were deceiving me."

"You know I would not lie. Gaff wants to avoid further bloodshed. While Bahrok's resources are overextended, Turlogan has the power to call off the invasion. When the New Britannians arrive they can join with Turlogan to enforce the peace, despite any treachery Bahrok might attempt. The war will be finished and the crows will go hungry again."

She tumbled the thought around in her head. "It is a breathtaking offer, I confess. It might even be convincing if it had the weight of law. Unless a great wheel has turned in Logos, I believe Lector Sartorius still holds the title of Blackthorn's Chosen. Lector Gaff does not possess the authority to surrender."

"Gaff has a plan for hobbling Sartorius. He claims the equations favor his success. Trust me, for a Mathematician the numbers have more authority than any god or king."

"And what of Blackthorn himself? Will he accept defeat?"

"No one knows Blackthorn's mind, but Gaff has certainly factored him into the calculations."

She grimaced. "The Pact of Four will fight you to the death."

"We will have neutralized Bahrok and Sartorius. I shall deal personally with General Nathaniel, and with considerable relish. They'll write songs about his downfall."

"And the Meer contingent? Chamberlain Kavah?"

"He is an unknown. So far he's only served a supporting role, providing spells and equipment. I cannot imagine he would be able to jeopardize a truce signed by all three warring nations."

The Way Master grunted assent. She entwined her long fingers. "Then tell me the terms of the surrender."

"Negotiators will have to decide the particulars, but Logos will cede the border mountains to Jukaran. They'll hand over the new mines to the Shirron. Lector Gaff proposes instead to trade for resources from New Britannia, assuming everyone can overcome their mutual distrust. Ironically enough, the end game is not far from what the Pact of Four had designed in the first place. Gaff's version, of course, subtracts the wholesale slaughter."

"It sounds as if Lector Gaff and I have solved the same equation. It is comforting to know that common sense is truly common." She closed her weary eye. Her mind thundered with possibilities. Many questions were still unanswered, and yet the window of opportunity was plainly open. Peace could be forged, but only with quick action. The New Britannians would arrive in three weeks. The bargain must be struck before then, to stave off their own desire for war.

She dragged her hands over her face, then smiled and squeezed the knight's wrist. "I am grateful that your death was not binding, Montenegro. You are a blessing to us all. I shall present Turlogan with Lector Gaff's proposal."

"You'll do more than that. You'll convince him to accept the surrender. I won't have New Britannian blood spilling on Logosian earth."

"I make no promises, unfortunately, except to do everything I can. Turlogan is a stubborn man."

"He cannot be more stubborn than you. I'd wager my grandfather's ghost on it. Thulann, we can't accept failure this time. There's too much at stake."

"And what if Turlogan rejects the offer?"

"Do not fail me, Way Master. Blackthorn is a deadly enemy. Don't corner him."

She sighed and glanced at the other Technocrat soldiers. They formed a tight perimeter, watching for the approach of Kumar clansmen. From their expert deployment she judged them to be as skilled as the Shirron's personal Tarkosh guard. The presence of Master Enosh underscored the similarity.

"They are calling you assassins," she commented to the knight. "They say you murder Bahrok's generals in their sleep."

"You know me too well to believe that." He stood and lifted his black helmet. Before donning it he said, "I shall meet you again ten nights from now. I can only accept one answer, Thulann. I trust no one more than you to bring this war to an honorable close."

She rose beside him and clasped his arms. "I accept the burden. My back will not stoop. Great Mother grant us victory, my friend."

"Victory for everyone, except the Pact of Four." He slipped the helm over his head and added, "Oh, and I have a message for Toria. Captain Bawdewyn has offered to spirit her home. It appears she has struck his fancy. And tell her

also, for my part, that I am glad she's still alive. If the world is burdened by a man like me, it deserves to be lightened by a face like hers."

Thulann opened a smile. "I shall inform her. Perhaps it will be a comfort." She looked to Master Enosh and said, "I am sorry for what I forced upon you, good warrior. Perhaps with this negotiation I can redeem myself."

The weapons master rose to his full height, a daunting apparition in the gloom. His eyes drifted into a cold moonbeam. "Way Master Thulann, you taught me to question the false master I followed. You have nothing for which to apologize. I've joined Montenegro to secure my own redemption."

The Technocrats each drew a vial out of their belts, from which they drank a quaff of magic potion. Then the band dissolved into the warm, whirring air. Montenegro was the last to vanish, giving her a nod as he did. She was aware of their receding footsteps, almost imperceptible. Then she was alone in the red rock corridors, the noises of the encampment filtering back into her awareness.

Her heart leapt suddenly. She had no time to delay. She retrieved her walking staff from where it rested against an old pipe, then hurried off into the night.

At the edge of Kumar's Throne bubbled a series of mud ponds. Steam churned beneath the ochre sludge, filling the air with a dense, viscous haze. Under this natural cover Montenegro and his men reappeared. The knight plucked off his helm. To the shadows he muttered, "Khyber, it's done. She's taking the offer to Turlogan. Signal Barghast to bring the skids and let's leave this place before someone gets curious."

"Not yet," replied the brigadier, stepping into view. "I want to make sure you weren't followed." He ordered the soldiers to double-check the perimeter.

Montenegro frowned. "Let's not dawdle. There are five thousand clansmen out there. Most of them will not be as accommodating as Thulann."

"And if just one of those clansmen sees our signal, we'll be dead before Brother Barghast ever gets here. Patience, Montenegro. Your job is done tonight. Let me do mine."

The knight squinted and massaged his eyes. Then he smirked at Master Enosh, who sat down beside him. "So, Shirron, you have dealt with the old battleaxe before. I dare say it explains your melancholy demeanor when I ask why you joined the brigade."

The enormous Juka darkened his gaze. "Thulann forced me to rethink who I was serving. I came to the conclusion that Sartorius was not the honorable choice."

"She has a talent for questioning motivations. Meeting Thulann will test a man's convictions, or at the very least his patience. I presume she is the one who gave you those scars?"

"I'm not interested in discussing it."

"Come now, Shirron. By the look of it Khyber will be hours securing our privacy. I'm of a mind to relax."

The weapons master scowled. "Naturally. It wasn't your nation that just surrendered."

Montenegro held back a retort. He slapped a palm on the Juka's back. "Quite so. Forgive me, Enosh. My family's shrine is devoted to Compassion and yet too often I neglect its demands."

The Juka pursed his lips. "Enough of your Virtues, Cavalier. Grant me some quiet. This has been a long night."

The New Britannian said nothing more. The soldiers waited beside the burbling pools of mud until Brigadier Khyber returned. To the gathered men he announced, "It's safe now. Barghast is on his way. When we get airborne we can't waste any time. We have to reach Junction in three days or less to rendezvous with the others."

Montenegro furrowed his brow. "Junction? I thought we were returning east."

"The plan has changed. His Excellency needs us in the city."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I did not want to risk revealing the matter in the course of your discussion with Thulann."

The knight sneered. "I am giddy at your confidence. But what is so important in Junction that it takes us away from the battlefield? Unless . . ." He raised an eyebrow. "Unless Gaff has located the old defenses under the city?"

Khyber said nothing in response.

Montenegro grinned. "So we'll capture them from Sartorius's troops and force him to negotiate with Gaff. That should prove satisfying. I confess, I shall enjoy fighting Technocrats again. It appeals to something aesthetic in my bloodlust."

The brigadier rolled his eyes. "You think too much of aesthetics. When Barghast gets here, try to force that clumsy automaton of yours to keep up with our skids. I don't want you slowing us down."

"I am in no hurry to smell the reek of Junction again, but under the present circumstances I'll make my best speed. The sooner we secure this peace, the sooner I can return home. I'm anxious to mount a proper horse again and tread grass instead of rainclouds."

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When the soldiers climbed aboard their machines and fled into the night sky, a slender shape emerged from one of the pools of hot mud. Thulann coughed and stumbled out of the haze, shaking off the steaming muck. She scrambled atop a boulder and indulged a chestful of satiny desert air. Then she knelt and gazed southward, in the direction the Technocrats had gone.

The effort had taxed her skills, but she had managed to track Montenegro and evade detection by the man named Khyber. The information she had gained was not as rewarding as she had hoped. Apparently Lector Gaff's authority hinged on physically capturing Junction. Her confidence in the surrender was not improved. Yet Montenegro had proposed the first sensible resolution to this fractured mess of a war. Thulann would have to convince Turlogan to accept it. The alternative would devastate Logosia, redden the wastelands with Jukan blood and possibly end the reign of Clan Kumar in Jukaran. The weight of the matter took its toll on her body. She returned to the encampment leaning heavily on her walking staff, a noticeable stoop in her back.

6

Tizan's Wall

In the lush folds of the Shirron's pavilion, Thulann leaned against the crescent table and watched her lover pace the tapestried rug. Turlogan stalked around the flickering bloom of a ring of braziers. His demeanor was anxious as he spoke. "Of course I shall accept Lector Gaff's surrender. When I march down the streets of Logos, I shall be happy to oblige him."

The Way Master crossed her arms. "That is a rejection, not an acceptance. The intention of the surrender is to keep us away from Logos. They will accept defeat but not subjugation."

"Then we have nothing further to discuss. I tell you again, my dogged sweet, I will conquer this land by springtime."

"By springtime the continent will lie in ruins. End the war now and we might just get the harvest in this fall."

He laughed and shook his head. "The benefits of peace are appealing, I grant you, but the notion is pocked with impossibilities."

She tilted her head. "It has certain difficulties, but I do not view it as unrealistic."

"Do you not? Very well, how do you propose to placate the New Britannians when ten thousand of them step onto the shore? I wager they did not build a hundred ships and sail them for three weeks only to turn around because Lector Gaff grows timid. Blackthorn sent an armada to level their capital. They are eager to return that sentiment. They will crave their plunder."

She spread out her hands. "They want recompense for their trouble and we shall have to give it to them. Consider this. There are forests on the southern coast that Blackthorn has not yet ravaged. I shall propose that Logos hand them over to the Britannians. They can settle beside the Technocrats and cement the trade relationship that Gaff wants to build. The two nations do share a common heritage, after all, such as it is."

The Shirron chuckled bitterly. "You are very optimistic for someone who has felt the bite of failed diplomacy so many times. Are you eager to lose another divot of flesh?"

Thulann rose from the table and barked, "I would lose it all to save the flesh of those soldiers outside! You know this invasion will cost thousands of lives. We never thought Junction would fall easily. Now we learn it has even more defenses than we suspected. And Logos has been impregnable throughout history, even when the Overlords fought for it. Yet you want to march us into that slaughterhouse to fulfill some dream of glory. I say you dream too dangerously, my handsome young buck."

"'Young buck,' is it? You see me as a headstrong boy? Let me tell you what this boy is dreaming about right now. He dreams that the Shirron accepts this surrender. The other clans perceive that it was Warlord Bahrok who forced Blackthorn into submission. When they return to Garron, the

chieftains demand a Great Tournament to place Bahrok on the throne. Clan Kumar slinks away in disgrace, trodden by Bahrok's ambition." His mouth registered distaste at the words. Then he fastened an intense look upon the Way Master. "But there is another version of the dream, you see. In this one the Shirron leads the armies of Jukaran and New Britannia to the very doorstep of Blackthorn. Though the victory is costly, Garron conquers Logosia. Clan Kumar occupies Logos and Blackthorn's armies become ours. The alliance with New Britannia is hardened in the fires of battle and we retain our honor and our dominance. That, my love, is a dream for which our soldiers will readily give their flesh."

"I never doubted your boldness, my love, but that is an ambitious vision."

"We forge the future. We are Jukan warriors. Without honor and glory we are worse than dead."

"Yes, we are warriors, but we are also mothers and fathers and wives and children. Let us not become a clan of orphans and widows. We are a mighty family, Turlogan. You would tear us apart in the lust for swift glory. I say our lives are better spent rebuilding. Kumar has lost no honor to Bahrok's treachery."

A sigh issued from his broad chest. He stopped pacing and massaged his temples. "You were always calm in the face of hardship. But my love, Akar is a weight I must bear every hour, every second I live. I have lost honor. I felt it crack apart with every stroke from those airships. Every warrior who died that day is a wound I must endure."

Thulann's heart sank. Akar was the crux of his pain, of course. Softly she murmured, "I should have been at your side."

He shrugged. "The past is spent coinage. It has purchased our future. The defeat at Akar forces my hand. I cannot carry anything less than victory now."

"You can, Turlogan, because I shall carry it with you."

"Nothing you say will convince me to accept Gaff's surrender."

"And if I say I shall marry you?"

His shoulders tensed. His brow furrowed. "What was that?"

She spoke quickly, listening to herself as if from a distance. "Negotiate an end to this war and the next time we set foot in the Hall of the Shirron, I shall be your wife."

Turlogan paled. "Great Mother. You look sincere."

Her breath began to flutter but she dared not stop. The words had been lurking inside her for longer than she could remember. They leapt from her tongue with strange catharsis. "I have never had better cause for sincerity. The fact is, I dream as well, my dear. I dream of spending my last years in a real home with a doting husband, like an old woman deserves. I want to enjoy the peace of your bed, the calm of your days and nights. I want to midwife Venduss's children and watch them grow underfoot. That is my dream, old man. We have earned it, you and I. But it cannot come true if the invasion proceeds."

The Shirron drew back as if her voice frightened him. His eyes searched her face. They almost looked frantic.

She reached out to clasp his giant hands. "Accept Gaff's surrender. Take me as your wife. Together we shall return to Garron and meet whatever challenge Bahrok flings at us. I have beaten him in combat before. We shall beat him in the Council of Warlords. He has never faced us when we stand together."

He closed his eyes and turned his face away. "Please, Thulann. Let me think."

"We have no time. The New Britannian fleet approaches. Gaff expects an answer in ten days." She stepped before him, clasped his waist. "I know what your heart is saying. Heed it, my love. I am yours to take, if you will."

Turlogan shook his head vehemently, then pulled away from her. "I said quiet! I need to think!" Toward the entrance of the pavilion he staggered as if wounded, then plunged out into the summer darkness. The tent flap sloughed loosely behind him. Thulann stared at it while her heart banged inside her chest. She felt the urge to cry out or to laugh or to call his name, but she simply lingered in heavy silence imagining where he had gone. She felt as if she had loosed some great animal into the night. Only the wild moons knew what direction it might run.

The blackness tasted metallic. Montenegro flared his nostrils, scenting the reverberant dark. He moved through some manner of tunnel or corridor that stung with smoky miasma. No light braved the cryptlike space, but small sounds whispered its shape. Steel floor panels registered his footfalls. Iron curves distorted the tenor of his breathing. He sensed the dull presence of a great mass around him, as if he ventured through the innards of some gigantic structure. Tiny clicks leapt through nearby spaces, like grains of rust or insect claws.

He nestled a miner's monocle over his eye. The lens had an alchemic glaze that imagined light where none existed. What Montenegro viewed in sepia tones surprised him. The underground corridor teemed with ancient, dormant machinery. The pathway traversed a hanging garden of

beams and chains and heavy pipelines, threading between stout vertical axles and clusters of wheel-size gears. A million bolts held the components together. The huge device was decrepit with age, cracked by time and trauma and choked with roots that never reached the surface. Hazy smoke drifted from gaps in the crumbling pipework. Vermin skittered in and out of the holes, rusty metal embedded in their shells.

The knight paused to gauge his surroundings. Other figures crept through the murk with him, brigadesmen in the act of infiltration. Their weapons perched ready in their gauntlets, but Montenegro did not think they would need them. This place was long deserted. If these were the only war machines that lay beneath Junction, he could see why Lector Sartorius had chosen to seal them off. They had not operated in generations.

After several minutes he uncoiled from his stealthy posture and leaned against a block of old iron. The Technocrats around him relaxed as well. A compact silhouette drew beside him and lit the blue spark of a lantern.

"There's no one here," said Brigadier Khyber with cautious relief in his voice. "I suppose Sartorius decided to lock up the tunnels and trust that no one would find them."

Montenegro nodded. "It nearly worked, too. If he had sent engineers down here, Gaff would have learned about it within hours. As it stands, we are only here through the dubious grace of the Techno-Prophet." He scanned the dead machinery. "Though I'm not certain that we have achieved any great victory."

A man in a grey Mathematician's robe stepped forward and warned, "Never leap to judgment when discussing the works of the Overlords. These machines have not been used

since before the Cataclysm, yet they are not as ruined as they appear."

The knight grimaced. "Barghast, all the healers in Britain couldn't resurrect this contraption."

"It is not sorcery that can repair this machine, but alchemy. Do you see this pipe? It is designed to carry restorative fluids for metals, not unlike your healing potions work for flesh. The Overlords relied heavily upon such fuels. We still use them today inside dreadnoughts and other automations. It is science of the highest order." Brother Barghast rapped a knuckle on the dusty metal. "If we repair this pipeline and the pump to which it is attached, perhaps we may breathe new life into these old defenses. That should force Lector Sartorius to listen to His Excellency's demands."

Montenegro pursed his lips. "Can you really fix it?"

"Not I. This task requires many craftsmen with specific expertise."

Khyber wiped the dust from his hands and said, "In any case we shall need to secure the tunnels while we decide what to do. Sartorius will learn all too quickly that we're here. And from the look of this place I'd say we have plenty of ground to defend."

"There are probably miles of tunnels," said Barghast.

"And we have less than three weeks to repair them," frowned the knight. "It looks like we may not get many chances to hit Bahrok's army again before the surrender. That is a genuine pity."

A large head thrust into the group. Master Enosh gave Khyber an urgent look. "Sir, you had best come down here. Something's happening."

The men rushed deeper into the caves. The eerie light of

their spark lanterns turned the mechanical gloom into a ghostly network of shadows. Montenegro was unsettled by the bizarre geometry of the place. Throughout Logosia the older, large-scale machines traced their origins to the mysterious Overlords who had ruled here before the Cataclysm. Not even the Jukan loresingers understood the nature of their vanished masters. The ancient technology reflected an alien symmetry that stirred deep, unnamed fears in Montenegro's gut. Blackthorn's most vile creations worried the same center of dread inside him. When he imagined a sprawling warren of these machines underneath the factories of Junction, the knight fought back revulsion.

But the sensation was not completely emotional, for he found himself enclosed by the sudden reek of decay. They moved through a region of odors that tangled the smoky air. It was the smell of organic rot. He wondered how that was possible in this lifeless place.

Farther down the corridor he saw the answer. Half a dozen brigadesmen peeked through a large doorway. Their demeanor was alert, even fearful. Their weapons were bared. In the chamber beyond the door sat a large, boulder-like shape that glinted metal. Its surface teemed with crab-like vermin, picking at rotten flesh. The stench was choking.

After staring for a moment, Montenegro recognized the grotesque thing. It was a dreadnought, a fearsome half-living war machine, probably dead for a week. Under the carpet of scavengers he made out the shape of its metal chassis and its many-jointed steel arms. He pulled away and covered his nose. "I'm afraid to imagine what might have killed it."

Khyber's expression grew wary. "Keep your voice down. It isn't dead, it's just dormant. Their flesh decays like that sometimes."

Barghast added, "The parasites inflict no lasting harm. Every few days it will wake up and circulate its restorative fluids, like we must do to these machines."

Montenegro rode a surge of repulsion. He clenched his fists and whispered, "Then let's get some heavy scourges down here and carve it up while it's still asleep! There's fifty of us. We can kill it if we have the stamina."

"We will not," countered the brigadier. He motioned to the soldiers around him. "Fall back. We're pulling out."

"You have to be joking!"

"We'll send juggernauts to handle this. Maybe His Excellency will be able to enlist a dreadnought or two for the job." He nudged Montenegro in the direction from which they had come. "Sartorius has chained a big watchdog down here, to keep us from overrunning the place. I won't lose ten or twenty men to subdue it. We'll let the automatons handle their own."

"You speak as though they're soldiers, too."

"They are what they are. Where's Piper? It's time to sound the retreat."

A safe distance from the dreadnought's chamber, a lanky boy arrived wearing light armor. To his body was strapped a box of gears with a wheel-shaped crank. Several tall levers jutted up and over his shoulder. Piper turned the crank and the device began to moan. Steam rushed from inside. When he tilted the levers the musical instrument chirped out a raspy tune. At the signal the platoon of Technocrats hurried back toward the exit of the tunnels.

From deep inside where the stragglers remained, Montenegro heard a piercing scream. He snapped the clockwork sword from his scabbard and lunged forward, but Khyber held him back. "Cavalier! Don't bother."

The knight threw off the brigadier's hand, but realized that the screaming had stopped. Instead a heavy clanking sound banged closer and closer from the depths of the machine-choked cave. The stench of death invaded the tunnel. Montenegro cursed and followed Khyber as the soldiers fled out of the dry, smoky darkness. For a change he welcomed the dreary sight of Junction, its polluted sky awhirl with the throes of a coming storm.

Thulann crouched in a thicket of serrated leaves. The desert shrub clung to the slopes of a steep, rocky mountain. Its roots held fast like claws, sucking the earth so dry that the surface fractured into disjointed blocks. The Way Master squatted on a bend of the tough plant, ignoring the ache in her game leg as she peered down the side of the mountain. A narrow pass split through the cliffs below. Insect shapes winged among the crags. The afternoon sun rained down with such force that the bluffs exhaled dust like a sigh.

Inside the pass was a large commotion. A force of Jukan warriors crowded the space with polearms and banners held high. They had erected a stone wall to block the pass. They faced the east with swords and spears brandished.

On the cusp of the desert before them was a dark ribbon of soldiers. The army of Clan Kumar was approaching the mountains. Bolts of sunlight rang from their shields in a vast, sparkling display.

The old Way Master leaned back against the high, arid slope. She licked warm sweat from her lip, then pointed into the rocky pass. "As I thought. There is the banner of Warlord Tizan of Clan Dragham. Bahrok picked his fattest toad to guard the pass against us."

She spoke to a tall, young warrior who knelt beside her.

Venduss shaded his eyes with a hand and gazed at the troops below. "He has no more than three or four hundred soldiers down there, I would say. Our siege engines can get us over that barricade. We can make a direct assault and punch through in less than a day."

Thulann nibbled her cheek in thought. "We do not have that luxury. Clan Draghram is known for their perseverance. We might sustain three casualties to their one."

"Once we are through the pass, nothing stands between us and the sea. I say it is worth the risk of casualties to secure that landing zone. In two weeks the New Britannians will arrive with their swarms of healers to repair the damage."

"You assume that our soldiers will be injured and not dead. Even an archmage cannot heal a body two weeks down the path to dust. Think strategically, Venduss. This will be a long war and we dare not spend our resources on Bahrok's traps."

Venduss grunted, "Will it truly be long, though? We may see its end soon. My father has not rejected the surrender as such."

"Nor has he accepted it. Until he does, we must assume the worst."

He turned to watch her face. "So you think my father will lead us into disaster."

"When the enemy surrenders, the war is over. Further conflict is dangerous vanity."

"Pride, Thulann, not vanity. There is honor to redeem."

She snorted. "This invasion will decimate us. We shall see how proud he is when the clan is destitute. I would expect such nonsense from a milk-toothed suckling like you, but your father has scars enough to know better."

"Way Master! Sheathe your tongue, please. I happen to

agree with your position. I believe we would acquit ourselves better than you imagine, but I see no pressing need to continue the invasion. I do not fear Bahrok's peacetime machinations. He will pay for his crimes in due course." He brushed a film of perspiration from his brow, then looked at her again. "But something is wrong. You seem more agitated about this surrender than I have ever seen you before. Why is that?"

She had told no one of her proposal to Turlogan. Neither had the Shirron divulged the secret. She mumbled, "This may be your first war, pup, but it is my final one. I want an end to it before I am gone."

"I have known you too long to accept that answer. Something else is happening. There is some personal conflict boiling between you and my father. It is plain to see."

She glanced down at the soldiers in the mountain pass. "Turlogan and I have always butted wills. We are two very old goats. This matter is no different."

"You should not lie to your future chieftain."

"And you should mind your own garden before you root around in someone else's! Your father and I shall tend our relationship as we see fit. You, young buck, need to prune the extra branches from your own."

He lifted his chin and glowered. "What are you suggesting?"

"Simply that you make a fool of yourself and everyone else by pursuing two women. You are betrothed to Tekmhat. You must break off with Toria or break off the engagement. Your passion is not long enough to stretch between them both."

"Now who is rooting in someone else's dirt?"

"It is not a private affair, Venduss. You represent all of us

in the alliance with Clan Eryem. I will not presume to tell you which girl to choose, but you must make a choice."

With a blink he grumbled, "Why must I? Important men keep their mistresses."

"Toria is no mistress and never shall be. If you do not marry her, you will lose her. You know that."

"I do not accept it."

"Then you will suffer. In the end you sacrifice both love and honor."

The warrior stared for a moment at the gathering forces of Clan Kumar. He measured his breathing and said, "Tekmhat will be an astonishing wife. But I cannot let Toria go. Not again, teacher."

"Behave like a man, Venduss! The time has come to display some backbone."

"If and when I am ready. Not before!" He punched the rough bark of the mountain shrub. The leaves rustled very slightly. "Mind your own agenda, Thulann."

She narrowed her one, old eye. "Heed my advice or not. It is your decision. For my own part, I have made my choices. Presently I await the consequences." In the rocky pass, another group of soldiers arrived to fortify the wall. The clatter of their voices and weapons careened from the stone bluffs. "There, you see? Fifty more of Tizan's clansmen. This pass has teeth like a nest of gulbani."

"I still say we can take it easily with a frontal attack. Tizan will blink."

"There is no need for such theater. We can find a less dangerous way. War is a craft, not a show."

Venduss displayed a frown. "Sometimes the path goes straight ahead." He crossed his arms and leaned back against a stone. As they watched the troops of Clan Dragham, Thu-

lann saw his expression shift from careful observation to a glare that was distinctly predatory. She did not approve of his attitude, but she doubted her opinion held much sway.

That night she dreamt of Venduss's childhood years, when Warlord Turlogan was lusty and fierce. For fifteen summers the son of Kumar and Narah had occupied his parents' throne, during which time he had been folded and hammered like fine steel into the personification of wild confidence. He was as strong as his namesake, the great enemy of the Overlords; he led the other chieftains with a mighty voice and a mightier sword arm; he was ferociously loyal to his motherless son; and for the war master named Thulann, he was the sinful epitome of temptation. Her own marriage was a dismal memory, her children turned into enemies; she was alone with her career when he stood before her with eyes agleam and mouth agrin, the glisten of wine on his lips, his titan's body fit and lean and taut as a stalking predator. He came for her and she ran, because she wanted to be hunted. She never relented; in her heart she knew that he was capable of running her down; and she meant to savor every moment until the day he captured her honestly. She was not young but she was beautiful and terrible, feared in Garron, and only one man could hope to chase her. And he did so, and he caught her often, but she never let him hold her; for she knew the night would fall when she could not break loose and she would be his prisoner, captive in his eyes and body. The fire of their passion would burn Garron to the ground. The rest of the world would be cinders and ash.

She woke in a sweat with the sheets thrown from her bed. A pale face leaned over, calling her name. "Thulann! Mistress! Wake up! It's starting!"

The Way Master squinted and gained control of her senses. Outside her tent honked the clan's war trumpets. The troops were attacking the mountain pass. She sprang from her bed and shouted, "Armor!" as she leapt into her silk fighting clothes.

Dawn had not fully spread its wings, but the crest of the sun hurled copper beams at the stone wall blocking the pass. Thulann and Toria kicked their ridgebacks as they galloped toward the clamorous front line. The Way Master saw the banners of three siege battalions mounting the initial assault. They would secure the walls for the siege towers, after which the heavy fighters would plunge into the fray. Thulann scanned across a thousand soldiers for the identity of the second wave. When she saw their insignia, she ground her teeth. The Tarkosh guard would spearhead the main attack. Turlogan, of course, would fight at their head.

He had not hinted that this action would take place. He must have planned it carefully behind her back. Her distraction had been unforgivable and this morning the clan might pay the price.

Thulann halted her mount in a swirl of dust. They had arrived at a spot on the parched ground that was unmarked but very tangible. It was the range boundary of the defensive artillery. Already the battleground was pitted with great wounds from spark stones hurled out of the crags. She and Venduss had mapped out the fortifications yesterday, so she was well aware of the ranges and positions of Clan Dragham's catapults and trebuchets. Turlogan's scout units were presently scaling the rock walls to eliminate them. Meanwhile, Clan Kumar's own artillery lined up at the boundary. Thulann galloped her ridgeback toward the huge stone throwers, with Toria close behind.

She dismounted beside the first trebuchet she reached. The enormous machine was a frame of timbers lashed with tarry rope. It had been erected during the night, according to standard protocol, but the crew of thirty showed no sign of fatigue. They sang hearty chants as they loaded another huge spark stone into the scoop, then unleashed the fifty-foot throwing arm. A sound like a gale wind roared from the swirling timber. The great arm flung the stone as if it were a pebble. The missile shrank from sight as it sailed toward the slopes. Its impact was marked by a burst of smoke and a blossom of electrical discharge. The sound arrived moments later.

Thulann motioned the crew to halt while she climbed to the spotter's platform. An engineer greeted her with a salute. She took from him a long spyglass. The contraption was prized booty from the Technocrats, one of their few devices that endured more than a week without replacement parts. She peered through the array of lenses to get a better look at the front ranks. Under the banner of the Tarkosh guard she discovered the Shirron. He sat under an armored shelter, safe from Dragham archers until his attack commenced. But Thulann did not see Venduss. She handed back the spyglass and hurried to ground level.

"We must not delay," she told Toria as they climbed into their saddles. "I want to go into those cliffs on the left."

"I thought you were supposed to fight beside the Shirron."

"He does not appear to want me as part of the main attack."

"That's not necessarily unflattering."

"Leave it," grumbled the Juka. "Venduss is not with him, either. I think I know why. When we mapped the bluffs yes-

terday we discussed a hidden pathway that would be ideal to take a small force unseen into the pass. There." She pointed to a slither of shadows in the rocks a quarter mile beside the defensive wall. "I believe that is where Venduss has gone."

The redhead ruffled her brow. "Mistress, that's underneath their catapults, in the strike path of our own artillery. It'd be suicide to go through there."

"That is what makes it ideal. They will not expect enemies to use that route while the stones are falling."

"But even if he survives, he can't get more than a dozen men through at a time. Why would Venduss bother?"

"For the same reason that we shall bother. Because on the other side of that path is a clear route to Tizan's wall. And in less than an hour Turlogan will be climbing that wall and swimming through an ocean of spears and swords and arrows. He might have some use for assistance from unexpected quarters."

Toria flinched as the giant trebuchet launched another spark stone boulder. The rush of sound was jarring. Seconds later the boulder crashed against the distant mountainside, exploding in an electric blast that toppled a landslide of stones bigger than herself. She raked small fingers through her mane of curls. "Yeah, he'll be in a heap of danger, hey? Good thing we'll be along."

They skirted the battlefield to reach the rubble-strewn base of the mountain. On foot they crept among boulders and scrub brush until they reached the tiny path. It crossed under a ridge of stone for several yards, then dipped down to a level out of sight of both the open desert and the pass. Already the ground was littered with charred rocks thrown from artillery craters in the cliff face above them. They paused while another boulder whizzed overhead. It smashed

against the mountain and rained heavy stones onto the pathway ahead.

Thulann handed Toria a small shield and strapped another to her own forearm. The minstrel looked incredulously at the wooden disk. "What happens if we get trapped by rocks?"

The Way Master shrugged. "I rely upon you to tell me that. You have been buried before. I have not."

The minstrel smirked and crooned:

*"When you are buried and can't see the sun,
Cast off your worries and try to have fun!
Sing with the maggots and dance with the worms!
You might as well rot on your own bloody terms!"*

They dashed along the pathway with urgent stealth. Each of them clutched a vial of healing potion in her shield hand. Within a few seconds the world shook and a rain of boulders crashed upon them. They whisked their shields overhead but the relentless blows hammered them to the ground. Thulann felt her ribs and one of her ankles crumple. The pain ripped her like knives. She swallowed her potion and the agony ceased. She heard Toria cursing as she did the same. When they proceeded, their pace was quickened. Then the *whoosh* of another boulder sounded overhead and they pressed against the rock face. The impact occurred behind them. They had taken two more steps when the next explosion tore through the cliff. Thulann's skull flashed with heat and the sunlight vanished. After a span of darkness she felt her fingers moving. She pushed outward. Stones fell away from her. Daylight returned. She coughed from the dust and gulped her second healing potion. Then she

crawled from the rubble to find Toria pinned to the ground, her legs flattened under a slate of rock. The girl's green eyes lay open as wide as coins, her mouth trembling in horror. A crystal vial lay inches from her fingers.

"Great Mother," murmured Thulann. She crouched down and leaned her back against the rock. For a few seconds she chanted into a trance of the Way, then shoved her legs to lift. The huge rock slid from the girl's mangled legs. Thulann's back spasmed. She poured the healing potion onto Toria's tongue. When the girl crawled to her feet she pressed against the Way Master like a frightened child.

"Come," said Thulann, "we are almost halfway there."

Around a blind corner they stumbled upon a scene of carnage. An enormous slab of rock, twenty feet on a side, had separated from the mountain. It rested at an angle against the wall. Half a dozen corpses lay crushed where it landed. They had all died instantly. Thulann's heart fell cold when she recognized the livery of Tarkosh guardsmen. But Venduss was not among them, and so she whispered a prayer and moved on. There was no courage without risk. They faced that truth themselves.

They squeezed through the dark, narrow hole between the slab and the cliff. Two more rockslides pounded over them, but the slab gave them shelter. On the other side they were yards from safe ground. They wasted no time in crossing.

They had entered into a stone crevice that paralleled the mountain pass. A hundred yards ahead it joined the main corridor. The sounds of battle echoed from the cliffs. They crouched behind a swatch of scrub and caught their breaths. Their armor and clothes were a bloody mess. By habit Thulann checked the healing potions she had brought. Inside the

leather bag on her belt, the stout crystal vials had been shattered by falling rocks. She licked a tingling drop from her glove and muttered, "Conserve your healing, child. Mine is gone."

The human let out a whimpering sigh. "I have one left. Let's hope we don't need it to get back out." Then she jerked her head and mouthed, "Did you hear a voice?"

They scrambled up a low slope behind them and discovered a Dragham soldier kneeling on a high ledge. His back was turned to them. He seemed to be watching something below. Thulann dispatched him noiselessly and they peered over the edge to see what was happening.

Fifteen feet below, the path they had followed rounded another bend. In an open area between hillsides was a band of nine Dragham warriors surrounding a smaller group. A pair of Tarkosh guardsmen braced shoulder-to-shoulder, their bow-spears jutting outward. With them stood two athletic figures, a tall Kumar officer and a female Initiate of the Way. Bloodstains covered the healer's white robe. Thulann grumbled under her breath, "Venduss brought along his bride. How gallant of him. Warlord Savan will be ecstatic to hear about it."

"I guess I spoiled him. Who's that talking to them?"

A Dragham officer addressed Venduss. Some sort of parley was occurring. Thulann stared for a few moments longer and then exhaled sharply. "By the Hand of Honor, I know that man. He comes from Ruhn. His name is Way Master Amhet."

"A Way Master? That's really bad news. Look, Venduss is going to fight him."

Thulann winced. "Venduss is going to lose. Prepare yourself to jump down."

The two warriors clashed swords in single combat. Venduss was the larger man but Way Master Amhet hurled two strokes for every one of his. The youth lurched and tumbled around his middle-aged opponent. His armor striped with cuts and blood. Then he leapt into a handstand kick that toppled the Way Master backward. Amhet of Ruhn cartwheeled to his feet, then sprang up at an impossible height. His longsword cleaved down into the leather seam of Venduss's shoulder armor. The steel plunged deeper and deeper. The Way Master landed nimbly as his opponent struggled to remain upright, though the effort looked futile.

Thulann's breath caught as she slithered over the side and dropped soundlessly to the earth. Her game leg protested the landing.

A bright sparkle tore across the path. As Venduss fell to his knees, Tekmhat loosed a glittering spell that engulfed her injured fiancé. When one of the Draghram soldiers thrust his spear at the healer, he let out a sudden cry and clutched his throat. The hilt of a knife protruded from his gorget.

Toria touched down beside Thulann and twirled another throwing knife in her fingers. In her right hand crackled her enchanted cutlass, dripping magical sparks into the dust. She bared her teeth at the soldiers. "Let's talk this out, hey?"

"Stop!" bellowed Way Master Amhet to his men. The soldiers held their weapons in check. The officer flicked Venduss's blood from his weapon and straightened his posture. "By the crows of Garron. Way Master Thulann. This is an unanticipated privilege. I greet you with the utmost respect and honor."

"I greet you with respect and honor, Amhet of Ruhn. Kindly help my student to rise."

"Of course." Without looking down he offered a hand to Venduss, who was reeling to his feet. The youth grimaced and accepted the help. He nodded tersely at Thulann. His face was scarred with frustration.

Thulann called out, "Tekmhat! Heal that Dragham dog." She pointed to the soldier with the knife in his throat. As the teenager complied, Thulann stood before her fellow Way Master. Her body required coaxing to its full height. She wished she had brought her walking staff, though it probably would have perished in the rockslides. "Way Master, we must pass this way. Stand aside."

"Warlord Tizan doubted anyone would use this path. He commands great perseverance but too often he underestimates the trait in others. I do not share that weakness." He pressed his palms together before his chest. "With respect, I shall not let you pass without conflict."

Thulann nodded. "Then I believe this is an engagement you and I can settle between us, if you think it warrants the trouble."

"Do I! What swordmaster does not dream of this opportunity? But again, with respect, you look somewhat haggard. Are you prepared?"

She smiled darkly. "For you, I am prepared."

The soldiers of both clans watched in wonder as the two masters bowed to each other. Amhet met Thulann's gaze and said, "My last victory was Timbesk of Jamark in a White Duel, two seasons ago. She lost an arm."

"My last victory was Bahrok of Garron in a Black Duel this season. We both died, but he yielded first."

They bowed again. Each of them began a slow ritual dance. Thulann breathed into a trance and her joints and muscles remembered flawless moves. Her mind flooded

with a lifetime of training. The feeling was exhilarating. She swept into a soft mental flow in preparation for the Duel of the Way. Unlike other contests, this one engaged particular rules that limited it to Masters of the Way. The battle was one of strategy and execution. It followed a strict sequence of actions. In trading accounts of their victories they had negotiated the pace and character of the fight. By announcing her defeat of Bahrok, Thulann had asserted the magnitude of her stamina and thereby warned Amhet against a protracted encounter. In turn he had conveyed to her that he was a highly mobile duelist. She knew to keep the contact tight. Thus had they agreed upon a very close and very quick engagement. Each then calculated how best to defeat the other. The ritual dance was a portrayal of the moves they would perform in the course of the duel. Thulann watched Amhet reveal exactly how he would try to kill her. She offered him the same courtesy.

When the dances were complete, they bowed again. They had no secrets between them. All that remained was execution. The sensation was one of overwhelming liberation.

It was almost enough for Thulann to forget that Turlogan was rushing into danger.

They faced one another, swords sheathed. They monitored unseen currents of interaction. Then they struck.

Seven pure metallic rings leapt in the air like birds. Thulann finished on one knee, her head bent, her sword flush to the pebbled ground. She was aware of dust clouding around her, filtering into her nostrils.

Behind her came two thumps, one from Amhet's body, the other from his head.

After a heavy silence followed the cries of the Dragham soldiers. Then their weapons clattered against those of the

Tarkosh guards. In a whirl Thulann launched herself from the ground and streaked into the midst of the enemy. Her blade flew by scent and sound and the tactile impressions of breath and footsteps and tender, parting flesh. The tang of blood stirred in the air as the last Draghram soldier thudded at her feet. Then she rose proudly and took a step forward.

She stumbled and fell to her hands and knees. She blinked at the sting of dust, but it was no use. Darkness was everywhere, a furtive tapestry over the world.

Amhet's first stroke had sliced open her eye. She was blind.

A glorious pain scintillated before her face. When she looked up, Tekmhat was gazing down at her with the remnants of a spell crackling between her fingers. The girl's expression was one of awe. Thulann smiled her appreciation for the healing. Her chest unknotted in a distinctly uncomfortable way.

Venduss helped her to stand. "Thank you, teacher. Are you all right?"

She blew out a very long, very relieved breath. "I am a grand fool." She did not look at Amhet's corpse as she wiped and sheathed her sword. "Let us keep moving. The battle does not wait for us and the object of my folly is in no less danger for this little skirmish. Toria, come here and let an old woman lean on you." The human rushed to her side. Thulann noticed a glance pass between Toria and Tekmhat, and another between the minstrel and Venduss; but the moment disappeared as the group hurried in the direction of the clamor of battle.

When they crested the rise that overlooked Tizan's wall, they found brace-mounted crossbows and sacks of quarrels

resting on the ground. Way Master Amhet's men must have been posted here as archers. Thulann, Venduss and Toria each loaded a crossbow while the two guardsmen nocked their bow-spears. Tekmhat flattened in the dust as the group watched a brutal melee unfold on the wall, twenty feet below them and twenty more away. Clan Kumar's wooden siege towers were fastened to the stone barricade by many steel hooks. The siege battalion pushed back the defenders with long pikes and bladed polearms. The Dragham soldiers sprayed flaming oil atop the structures and just as quickly the healers of Kumar doused the fires with water magic. A torrent of arrows slashed the noisy air, streaming in both directions. The roar of clashing warriors fed itself with a deafening frenzy.

Then war trumpets blared. The army of Clan Kumar surged up the wooden towers and plunged into the sea of defenders. The Tarkosh guardsmen leading the charge overmatched the Dragham warriors, though sheer numbers slowed their advance to excruciating inches. And in the midst of the chaos stood one giant far above the others. Shirron Turlogan wheeled his father's great two-handed sword as if it were completely weightless. Enemy Juka flew aside in swift, bloody ranks. The warlord's face was a mask of berserk rage as he carved into the horde of brawny warriors, the majority of whom were less than half his age. Yet his fury was greater than theirs. Within seconds his guardsmen had eased away to give him more room, as he had no use for their protection. The defenders shrank back from him as well and he seized every foot of the wall they surrendered. When he let out a furious war cry, Thulann's spirit leapt. "Look at the magnificent idiot!" she shouted. "The Great Mother herself would melt in his heat!"

An arrow sprouted from his chestplate, but he did not acknowledge it. A second arrow followed, then a terrible stream of them, one after another, eight or nine in the span of a second. He bellowed and staggered back. When enemy soldiers rushed forward he chopped them down in mighty strokes; but his stance was rapidly failing. Thulann and her companions fired their heavy missiles into the crowd. Then she gathered her legs to leap to his aid, when a column of glittering light spouted from the Kumar ranks. The healing spell from the siege battalion splashed the Shirron and restored his strength. The arrows dropped from his body. He renewed his assault with even greater vigor. Thulann noticed an awful kind of glee in his eyes. She spat a laugh and slapped Venduss on the rear. "That stone-headed pter-anx does not need our help! But neither should he steal the glory. Lower this frail old crone to the wall and let us see if we can match his body count!"

In the pounding sun of afternoon, deep inside the throat of the pass, Warlord Tizan sounded the retreat. Turlogan rode his ridgeback in the lead as Clan Kumar chased the Draghram forces down the long, rubble-thick corridor. At the other end the enemy Juka clambered aboard longboats that bobbed at the edge of the sea. They fled to the cheers of the triumphant army. Their triangular sails shrank into the distance, but Thulann's gaze fell elsewhere. To the south lay a wide strip of barren land bounded on one side by the ocean and on the other by the talon foothills of the high, grey mountains. This was the ground they must secure for the New Britannian landing. They would be woefully vulnerable to attacks from the sea, yet they needed to hold it for only two weeks. By that time, if the Great Mother willed it, the surrender would be finalized. She could not imagine

what might happen after that. Wars she understood, espionage she had mastered, intrigue constituted her daily affairs; but peace was something that had always eluded her. It seemed a daunting proposition, though one that made her heart beat quickly. She had always enjoyed new challenges. This might be the most difficult yet.

7

The Dagger

*I*nto a lair at the top of a mountain did Sir Lazaro lead his ten knights. There they awakened the ancient wyrm Malgotha and set themselves to killing it. One by one did the serpent devour the brave knights, and one by one did each strike a grievous wound before falling. In the end only Sir Lazaro remained, trapping the wounded creature in its cave.

But when he raised his magic sword, the Talon of Covetous, to render the felling blow, Malgotha the Wyrms begged him to stay his wrath. "I am a human cursed by sorcery with an immortal form and a terrible hunger. If you kill me I shall rise again. If you help me remove the curse, the world shall be free of my terror." Sir Lazaro agreed to help the foul creature. The moment he did so the wyrm cried a tear that transformed into a golden heart. And Malgotha returned to the shape of a beautiful, grey-eyed maiden. On that day did the Virtue of Compassion move a brave knight to pity and thus rid the world of a monster.

The tunnel was a bramble of twisted machinery, shredded and heaped with savage force. Montenegro held up his spark lantern and whistled at the scope of the destruction. The

slanted corridor must have once been a nexus of pipelines and great, oily axles, or so he surmised from the ruined metal shapes that clogged the fifteen-foot tunnel. Plumbing and mechanics had been torn from the walls and jammed together with deliberate intent. At some time in the past, someone had sealed off this passage. The result was imposing. The scene reminded him of an unthinkable rat's nest.

A collection of robed men examined the wall of debris. Among them worked Brother Barghast. His jowled, green face was animated with thought. Montenegro stepped beside him and commented, "You're going to need an ocean of restorative fluid to repair this little corner of the den."

The Juka nodded. "There is no recovering these machines, but the Order of Engineers assures me that the war engines will function without them. The pumps we repaired do not service these conduits. A second circuit of pipes is in place here." He tilted his head and explained, as if he still pondered the theory, "It seems, Cavalier, that the tunnels go much deeper than we expected. There is a complex of machines below us that serves a purpose or purposes we have not yet fathomed."

The knight grimaced at the thought, then muttered, "I don't think they shall be functional in the near term." He touched a bent shaft that looked like a pipe, only to discover it was solid iron. "By my Humility, that is a terrific bit of mayhem. Is it more handiwork of Sartorius's dreadnought?"

"This is more than a dreadnought can do. Mechanical strength alone will not suffice." The Mathematician pointed to a strip of blackened steel. "Do you notice the scorching? This metal was softened with heat before it was ripped apart. No dreadnought nor juggernaut can produce a fire that intense."

"So Sartorius has built a new kind of gear-boned monster, with a furnace in its gullet."

"No. One cannot construct so powerful a machine in a tinker's workshop. It needs factory resources. That would require the complicity of Lector Braun and the Engineers, and the odds are considerable that His Excellency would have mentioned such a project to us."

The knight chuckled. "Braun did seem rather eager to stick a dagger in Sartorius's belly. But if the Chosen didn't do this, then it must have happened long ago. Before the Cataclysm. No one's been down here since then."

Brother Barghast sighed. "I fear this was done only recently."

"How recently?"

"Since we entered the tunnels. Not more than two days ago. Probably when our automatons were fighting the dreadnought."

Montenegro widened his eyes. "You're saying whatever did this is still down here with us?"

"Perhaps. It is probable that the creature or creatures remain in the deeper levels of the complex."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because this tunnel was sealed off from the other side." He clasped his forearms together and stared up at the massive, tangled blockage. "Something does not want us to penetrate its lair. I believe it is prudent that we heed its wishes. There are many automatons constructed by the Overlords that still lurk in the pits of Logosia. We do ourselves no benefit to test their wrath."

"I should say not." He gaped at the mangled machinery for a few seconds longer, then said, "Do what you think is wisest, Barghast. I shall not be here to help you. I leave

tonight for the north. Lector Gaff has completed the formal application for surrender and Khyber and I are going to deliver it to Thulann. We'll soon find out how smart Turlogan is."

The Mathematician bowed his head. "The Machine subsumes all outcomes, violent or peaceful. Yet the weaker half of my soul prays for your success."

The knight smiled. "As do we all. The brigade should do fine without us for a week. We're well entrenched. Sartorius's troops are still loitering on the surface like nervous children. I doubt they will move in before we return."

"We shall manage in your absence. The first war engines should be functional in a few days. Once that occurs, we shall easily answer any hostility from Lector Sartorius."

"I'm here to ask about a different machine, though. Have you begun the latest modifications to my horse?"

"My apprentices are constructing the parts, but we have not yet applied them to the automaton."

"Good, then I can take it with me. I have no mad wish to ride a kite skid again."

"You should learn anyway. That automaton was supposed to be a temporary solution. It is slow and your 'improvements' will make it slower still."

Montenegro laughed. "We're building a warhorse, my friend, not a racehorse. Have no fear. Once this business is over I'll take the machine home to New Britannia and not bother you again."

"I shall miss the challenge. It is among my finest work." The Juka blinked and said, "And I shall miss you as well, Cavalier, after you go. I suppose we shall not convince you to remain in Khyber's service."

"Not with a tower of gold and Pikas's head impaled at the

top. The green hills of Cove have never stopped calling me. I have a life to win back." He smirked and added, "And a wife to conquer, as well, I suppose."

Brother Barghast stared at him. "Sister Raveka must not leave the Order. You are aware of that fact."

He boxed the Technocrat on the arm. "We can fight about it later. Walk with Virtue, Barghast."

"And you as well, noble savage."

The knight chuckled and turned away. He exited the shredded ruins of ancient Overlord machinery, a huge, jagged whorl of rusty metal. The devastation was sobering but the end result was desirable. All of this foul technology from darker times ought to be crushed. He would be glad to leave it behind and return to the woods and meadows of New Britannia. He craved a draught of pure, silken air and the organic sensations of home.

The compound outside the Shirron's pavilion was alight with celebration of the day's victory. So many flames burned on lamps and braziers and firestacks that the tips of the ocean waves shone gold instead of pearl. The chime and tinkle of percussive Garron music danced atop the rush of sea wind. Long tables brimmed with food and dark wines. Great Jukan bull carcasses roasted over pits of coals, heaving their savory smoke across the jubilant scene. Overhead the banner of Shirron Turlogan fluttered and snapped with excitement.

A bustle of smartly clad servants attended the whims of the revelers, who comprised the officers and war masters of Clan Kumar. The festivities were raucous with tales of the day, as drunken warriors leapt about to demonstrate their achievements in battle. Turlogan himself participated in the

exchange. In dramatic fashion he mimed with stalks of vegetables the pattern of arrows that had stuck into his chest. Then he threw the stalks aside and showed the crowd how he had cut down the Dragham defenders. A cup of wine sloshed in his hand, thirsty for frequent refills.

Thulann sat at the head table wearing a shawl of the finest, gold-sprinkled silk. The voluminous fabric covered her head, one edge sweeping in a graceful curve to conceal her missing right eye. Toria had washed the Juka's cloud-pale hair and braided it for several hours. Her gown was belted with a silver cord. The embroidered fabric draped with luxuriant weight. A ruby glistened on her brow. She watched the animated Shirron with a quiet smile on her face. This was a Turlogan she had not seen in many years. He was acting like a child in the throes of victory. Ritual propriety lay trampled in the rush to celebrate, and yet this boisterous display was itself something of a tradition. Warriors sang the joys of life, and never more so than after battle.

When Turlogan wheeled to face her, she broadened her smile. He leaned over the table and kissed her hand, then grinned, "My dearest, tell them how you lost your beautiful eye this morning."

The officers goaded her into complying, though she spoke from the comfort of her chair. Briefly she recounted her introduction to Way Master Amhet and then described the swordstroke that had landed on her face. "He cut my eye straight through like a grape with his first slice. Luckily Tekmhat gave me a fresh one from her bag of spells. But I felled six of their warriors without the luxury of sight."

"Five!" protested Venduss, slamming down his goblet. "The guardsmen slew one apiece and I killed two of them."

"You only thought you killed two. My blade is swifter

than your eye, suckling, and even when I am blind I see more than you."

The crowd broke into laughter and Venduss threw cheese at them. Then General Fekhet rose from his chair and lifted his wine cup high. "I rejoice that you are not blind, Way Master. We should be lost without your vision. Great Mother watch over brave Tekmhat and the wizards of Water Magic."

The festival murmured its agreement. A slip of calm invaded the seaside as everyone drank a swallow of wine. Thulann drank two herself and said, "Indeed. Though I confess, I am not certain I approve of healing magic in all cases. It often makes us sloppy, do you not agree?"

Turlogan laughed and cupped her cheek. "We should all be as sloppy as you, my love."

"But Thulann," asked Fekhet, "what happened to the Way Master you fought? Did you slay him?"

"In the end I removed both of his eyes, with a little room to spare." She dragged her hand edgewise across her throat. A golden choker twinkled in the action. The officers barked with laughter. "Honor the name of Amhet of Ruhn. His skill was a lesson even to me."

The warriors raised their cups again and toasted a fallen enemy.

The Shirron cast his reddened eyes around the compound. "Where is my daughter-to-be, anyway? I have not seen her tonight. Did her father spirit her away?"

Venduss shook his head and smiled. "She is close. As an Initiate of the Way she does not indulge in wine, so I presume she has excused herself from the noise."

"I shall find her," said Thulann as she stood with the aid of her walking staff. "I am overfull from the clamor myself. You swordsmen with your bleating voices overwhelm my deli-

cate constitution." The officers laughed and hooted at the jibe, but none of them dared to throw food.

She walked away from the merriment and into the calmer shadows behind Turlogan's pavilion. The ocean breeze swept over her with a cool, salty touch. Her loose clothes waved and flowed in perfect arcs, evidence of the expense with which the Shirron adorned her. But she rarely wore his gifts of finery. Their appeal was mostly fleeting. She only did so tonight by way of apology to him. She held herself responsible for the way he had neglected her this morning. She had not approved of the frontal assault. Her demeanor had given him no room for negotiation and so he had not informed her of the dawn attack. Yet the result of the action was an easy victory. Warlord Tizan had not counted on such quick aggression. He was caught unprepared. Clan Dragham lost a hundred men. Clan Kumar lost fewer than forty. The evidence suggested that Turlogan's very presence in the thick of battle had demoralized the enemy and hastened their retreat. And so she owed an apology to Venduss, as well. He had been correct yesterday afternoon. Sometimes the path did go straight ahead.

But she would have to wait for the celebration to subside before offering Turlogan her apology in earnest.

She clasped both hands to her steel-encased walking staff. Pausing in the windy calm, she attended her pointed ears. She made out two female voices laughing. She tracked the sound behind Venduss's tent, where she discovered an unlikely scene. Toria sat cross-legged atop a wooden barrel. The girl wore fine clothes of her own, a filmy dress and sari acquired from a trader weeks ago. The outfit was disheveled, immodest. In her lap teetered a bottle of wine that looked mostly empty. The minstrel fought a spasm of

giggles as she reached out to pat the shoulder of her companion. Kneeling on the ground in front of her was Tekmhat of Clan Eryem in a white Initiate's robe. The Jukan girl was laughing as well. Thulann heard the smack of wine in her voice. The jubilant pair gathered their self-control and began to sing in unison:

*"Now pull, bully boys, and I'll tell you a lot
'Bout the wealthy young lassie they call Tekmhat!
Her lust was unbound but her virtue policed,
But she never had nothin' on Bawdewyn the Beast!
So hey-holly-hoyo, now pull, bully-boy-os!
'Twas never another like Bawdewyn the Beast!"*

Their composure collapsed into breathless laughter. Thulann recognized the shanty sung by the crew of Captain Bawdewyn's brigantine *Menagerie*. Toria drank from the bottle again and Tekmhat followed suit. Then they prepared themselves and attempted a second verse:

*"Now pull, bully boys, and I'll tell you a story
'Bout the wee little minstrel they call Tiny Tori!
She'll give you a rise like a fistful of yeast,
But she never had nothin' on Bawdewyn the Beast!
So hey-holly-hoyo, now pull, bully-boy-os!
'Twas never another like Bawdewyn the Beast!"*

When they completed the song Thulann struck from the shadows. She cracked the end of her staff against the barrel, toppling it. Toria squealed and thumped onto her back, sandaled feet thrown high in the air. The minstrel watched the barrel as it rolled across the rocky ground, bumped past the

limit of Turlogan's compound and splashed into the tossing breakers. The girl doubled over and choked with laughter.

Tekmhat's reaction was precisely the opposite. Her eyes followed the length of the staff until she saw Thulann standing in the gloom. The Initiate paled with terror and hurled her face and hands to the ground at the Way Master's feet. Thulann nudged her and growled, "To your tent, filthy cub. Pray your judgment comes from me and not your father." Tekmhat reeled off into the encampment, her face a twist of raw panic.

Thulann glowered at the sodden Toria, who lay on her back and giggled. Her freckled face had turned scarlet and her lips were fastened into a smirk. "Well, Mistress, I guess this means you won't invite me to the party, hey?"

"I may well invite you to leave my service! What in the name of Kumar's honor were you trying to accomplish here?"

"Nothing," grunted the human as she struggled to sit up. Her copious hair fell into her face. She blew at a lock of it and laughed. "Nothing, honestly. We were just getting to know each other."

Thulann growled, "If this is some amateurish attempt to disgrace that girl—"

"No! Great Mother, Thulann, not everyone connives like you do, hey?" The comment jabbed the Way Master deeply, but before she could retort Toria continued, "Tekmhat came to me and asked how she could repay me for saving her life this morning. Can you imagine that? I mean, what was I supposed to say? So I told her she could sit down and share a drink with me. I thought maybe we could break the ice. I don't know. Work things out or . . . I don't know."

The old Juka regulated her angry breaths. "You made a

mistake, Toria. Tekmhat is not like you. She is a creature of tradition and ritual. She has no command of her world or herself. One trespass like this could ruin her life. Do you understand the damage you may have done?"

The girl looked away and said nothing more. Thulann grumbled her pique, but did not shape it into further reprimand. Toria was too inebriated to listen. With a sniff she said, "Take yourself away from here until you acquire a more respectable disposition. Perhaps you can celebrate with the Tarkosh guard. Their manner of revelry is more closely aligned to your own." The statement was not an insult but a genuine assessment of the facts. The minstrel seemed to take it as such.

When Thulann turned away the human called out, "You look beautiful tonight, Mistress. I mean that."

She did not look back. "Thank you, child."

"Treat him well, Thulann."

The Way Master brought a crockery jar into Tekmhat's humble tent. The girl was chanting mantras of the Way, tear tracks staining her cheeks. Thulann found a cup and dipped warm tea from the jar. She handed it to the frightened teenager. "Drink this. It will take the edge off the wine and help you sleep. You must also swallow five goblets of water tonight or your skull will split to pieces by morning. Do not forget. And hide your chamber pot. It can betray you. I shall come around later to collect it. I expect to find you asleep by then."

The Initiate was not yet proficient enough in Water Magic to eliminate the alcohol from her own blood. The fact must have mortified her, for she accepted Thulann's medicine as if it were an antidote to Logosian poison. She bowed her head quickly. "I am unworthy of your mercy, Way Master."

"None of us are worthy, little insect, but we must pass the days nonetheless. Now hurry and drink. You are not my most important business tonight."

Thulann found Turlogan standing outside the door to his pavilion. He had thrown off the sleeves of his embroidered caftan, so that the garment draped in pleats over his belt. Above the hips the warrior's body was bare. She saw him in silhouette, his striking outline traced by the backlight of a lamp. To the Jukan woman he looked like temptation personified. Her body shivered. She crept behind him and snaked her arms around his waist and in an instant familiar warmth passed between them. He laid his giant hands over hers. She felt as much as heard his gruff moan of pleasure.

"Take me inside, old man," she murmured. "I have had enough of the world tonight."

They were alone under the drapery of his opulent tent. He kissed her hand and opened a wooden cabinet, from which he selected another bottle of wine. As he poured two cups he said over his shoulder, "Did you find Tekmhat?"

Thulann leaned against the center pole and adjusted the lilting drape of her shawl. "I did, poor child. She is cowering in her bed. One drop of wine and she fears being burned at the stake. I considered it, of course, but I thought I might save the effort until the weather turns cold."

The towering Shirron handed her a cup. "I shall forget you said that if Savan comes to call. He need not know how rotten an influence we are. He coddles that girl, but she is stronger than he wants her to be."

"Strength without wisdom is a recipe for hardship. You should know that well enough, my darling." She chuckled, then attempted to banish her thoughts of Venduss's tangled

relationships. She failed. The matter weighed upon her. She found solace in Turlogan's glistening eyes. After a sip she laughed, "Great Mother, explain to me why some people dream of being young again? Youth is not a blessing. It is a disease. Time and again I have watched its ravages. It is a pox that irritates the flesh and enfeebles the senses. I spent a great deal of energy surviving my youth. I have no desire to be reinfected."

The warrior grinned, sly and askance. "And what shall you do now that you have escaped into healthier decades?"

She dangled the wine cup between two fingers, stepping away from the tent pole. Her exquisite gown swirled as she neared him. "I believe I shall find an old man who has taken the measure of the world. I have no use for childish groping. I want results."

He stepped back and raised his hands. "No. Stand there in the firelight. I am not finished looking at you."

She stopped and tilted her head. "The landscape is pleasant to see, Shirron, but to conquer it you must walk the hills and dales."

"I thought I might avoid a frontal assault this time." She laughed without inhibition. With a heavy stare he watched her and said, "You were like a mountain to me once, you know, when I was a boy and you were my mother's fetching young spy. You were so grand I could scarcely see all of you at once. But I knew I had to climb to the top. And I did. By the Hand of Honor, I did! And look at you now. You are my treasure. The years have torn down your cliffs and crags and all that remains is this diamond at the center, bright and keen and harder than any steel. You dazzle me, my love, now more than ever."

"You shall recite a poem next, proclaiming the virtues of my bodily components. I can hear the winds building."

He tilted down his head, aiming his squat horns in her direction. "If I do, you shall listen in silence, my dear."

She raised her eyebrows. "Ah, the wine sharpens your tongue. Perhaps you shall slit me open."

"I have dreamed for years of the sight before me. I have lain awake in the night with this vision over my head, like a phantom. If words leap from my mouth it is because they cannot lie still any longer." He lifted one hand as if reaching for her, but rubbed his fingers together instead. She sensed a nervous tremble. Quickly he gulped another mouthful of wine. "And I do apologize for the quantity of drink I have poured into my gullet. I speak more boldly when the room spins, and I must be bold to do what I have to do."

She stepped before him. Her fingertips tickled up the line of his abdomen. "If you drink much more, old serpent, I wonder if you shall do anything at all."

"But that is the entirety of the challenge, you see," he said. His breath caught. She swore he stuttered. "Because I do not intend to do anything with you tonight, nor any other night, despite everything in the world that you are to me."

Her hand tingled against him. He could not have spoken the words she had heard. She squinted. "Will you say that again, my love?"

"No. Yes, I will. I must—I have decided—" He pushed her wrist aside and took a long step away. He stared at the richly decorated wall of the pavilion. "I have decided to be your chieftain and your Shirron, but not your lover, Thulann. Not anymore. I am withdrawing my heart."

Her body turned to ice. Her muscles responded like molasses. She rotated to face him but could not see his expression. "I see. This is about the surrender, is it not?"

His great fists clenched. "Of course it is, that offer, that damned dagger you shoved into my heart! What else would compel me to this?" Then he latched a scowl upon her and she wished that he had not. Her chest began to ache. "For twenty years I begged you to marry me, Thulann. For twenty years our love looked forward. And now you tell me that this is what I was waiting for, this political trick, this sleight of hand. If I surrender, you will marry me. How splendid! At least you saved that card for something extremely important."

She reached for him, but he deflected her with a disdainful glance. Her mouth could not form the proper words. "Great Mother. Turlogan. You know that was not my intention."

"I have spent a week in hell. Do you know that? I tried to hate you for it. I truly did. But damn my soul, I cannot. I adore you, Thulann, but I have made up my mind. I shall not dangle on your hooks any longer. You have always schemed on my behalf and Garron is in your debt for it, but by the Great Mother you shall not scheme against me! I am not a pebble on a game board. You ruined everything when you tried to move me like one."

"That was never—"

"No! I do not want to hear your explanation. We have never muddled our feelings with words. Reality is as hard as stone and we cannot deny when it sits before us." He sucked a tremulous breath and entwined his fingers before him. With measured calm he stated, "The invasion will go on, my dearest, and we shall not be married. That is my decision. You may leave the army if you think I have betrayed you. You may leave the clan if you hate me now. But whatever happens, you must leave my side. You must leave my side, Thulann."

She regained her breath and murmured, "You owe me a chance to defend myself."

"No, I do not. Leave me, Thulann."

"You are drunk, Turlogan!"

"Yes, I am! I could not do this any other way."

Her face grew stern. "I shall not go, old man!"

"But you shall!" The tremendous weight of his body swept toward her. His arms enfolded and plucked her off her feet. She found herself moving quickly toward the exit.

In shock she cried out, "Great Mother! Turlogan! Forget what I said, forget the surrender, look at what you are doing!" and then the night air surrounded her. He planted her gold-braided sandals on the hard ground and pushed her away from his tent. Perhaps the wine had sapped his control or perhaps it was sheer anger, but his irresistible strength hurled her backward until her balance vanished. She could have recovered but her attention was captured by the flutter of the pavilion entrance. It closed with a distinct snap. Then Thulann landed on her back, tearing some part of her billowing gown. The insistent ocean breeze lifted the shawl from her head and flung it away into the encampment. Passersby lunged forward in several small groups, gasping and calling her name, but no one came near. Fear tinged their voices.

Thulann opened her mouth to speak, but a choked silence emerged. She knew Turlogan was correct, of course. Nothing meaningful between them had ever involved words. All that mattered were their actions, those that had provoked him and those he had taken in response. The result was plain in the amber firelight, sprawled out on the rocky ground for the benefit of the gathering crowd. The crash of the ocean waves could not fill their gaping silence.

* * *

From atop the barren, moonlit crags, the ocean breakers looked like ranks of silver cavalry galloping ashore. Montenegro imagined steel-armored horseheads tossing in a frenzy. He was not prone to fantasy but nostalgia had captured his thoughts, though admittedly the feeling was bitter-sweet. In less than a week the New Britannian fleet would land within miles of here. The knights would come ashore in reality then. He was not sure how he might greet them.

"If the invasion continues," Brigadier Khyber had said to him, "you must commit your intentions immediately. I would be more than satisfied to keep you in my company, but only if your motivations are clear. I have to trust you, Cavalier, or you must go."

"Then we'll spare no effort to stop the invasion," Montenegro had replied, "because I have no wish to be your enemy."

The Technocrat had laughed. "Don't lie. You would love to meet me on the battlefield. We would be spectacular enemies."

"That is the terrible truth," was his answer, "and that is why we must not fail."

Now he and Khyber and Master Enosh perched atop a coastal mountain. A squad of brigadesmen watched the perimeter of the scrubby plateau for signs of approaching Juka. Thousands of campfires scintillated on the beaches to the north, the sparkling might of Clan Kumar.

Thulann would arrive in an hour or two. She would bear the Shirron's response. In turn Montenegro would hand her a scroll that documented Lector Gaff's intent to negotiate a settlement. If all went well, they would effectively end the war tonight. A few days later Montenegro would meet the New Britannians as an unlikely, resurrected hero.

And then he would pursue the Pact of Four until the last scrap of earth refused to harbor them.

"Montenegro, you could have at least drunk your draughts of invisibility and made this a challenge for me."

The windswept clearing sang a chorus of drawn steel. The brigadesmen leapt into a ring around Thulann, who stood, impossibly, a few feet behind Khyber. The officer himself crouched behind his shield, his mechanical-jawed gauntlet open wide to strike. The old Juka made no response except to lean motionless on a staff. Her textured Way Master's robe danced in the salty wind.

At her side stood the waifish Toria, dressed in loose Garonite clothes that were tied at the ankles and wrists. Her hair was cinched into a foxtail and her expression was restrained joy.

Montenegro laughed and waved off the soldiers. "Now that is the old woman I remember from the Vesper beaches. You've lost none of your skill, Thulann, though I am closing the gap between us." He shone a smile at Toria. "Well, little thief, shall I embrace you or would Venduss and Bawdewyn fell me with jealous daggers?"

Toria traded glances with Thulann and then sprang forward, throwing her arms around him. "You may carry me away any time you want! I am yours forever, black ghost."

He gave her a squeeze. "Perhaps I shall at that. You are less trouble than my present lady by a cataclysmic margin."

She wrapped her arm around his waist and giggled. "I'll take that as a challenge, hey?"

"And Thulann," he called out, "tell me the news. I have never been good at reading your face and I am half as capable since you lost that eye."

"What is that scroll you carry?"

He held up the metal tube. "Lector Gaff's truce, ready to sign and seal."

She glanced down for a fraction of a second, then said, "Take it back to Logos. The Shirron is not interested."

His gut went cold. "Are you positive? Did he even consider it?"

"He took it under advisement, like a dog considers fruit, but his goal has long been set. If anything, this has encouraged him to proceed."

Montenegro patted the small of Toria's back and she stepped away. He twisted the scroll in his hands as he talked. "And you did everything you could to convince him? Be honest, Thulann. It would be uncharacteristic of you not to have another scheme in your quiver."

She chuckled with little sound. A sadness flitted across her features. "I have used all my missiles, my friend. Too many, in fact. He will no longer talk to me except in the most formal of settings."

The knight remembered the glow on her face when she used to speak of Turlogan. She showed as much pain now as on that dread night, years ago, when they believed Venduss to be dead. He felt for her, but the sympathy was only a drop compared to the storm rising inside him. This simply could not be true. The Shirron would be a fool of historic proportions to turn down this offer of peace. He thrust the scroll forward again. "Take it to him anyway. Let him read it. Maybe he'll see reason if it is written before his eyes."

"It will not sway him."

"Try it anyway! By the scars of Stonegate, he can't be that thirsty for carnage."

The Juka accepted the metal tube, though her expression

showed no confidence. "He believes the offer is proof that Logos cannot defend itself from us."

"It is exactly the reverse," said Brigadier Khyber. His voice was chilly and firm. "We don't want bloodshed but we are extremely capable of producing it. Do not force us to prove that fact."

Montenegro nodded. "The brigadier is right. Thulann, I've seen a fraction of their defenses. You'll lose warriors by the thousands. This doesn't have to happen."

The Way Master sighed gravely. "You need not convince me. I do not want to spend my final years mourning the decimation of my clan. But I fear I cannot help you, except to deliver this to the Shirron." She tucked the scroll into her belt.

The knight massaged his temples. "Then he's the one who stands in the way of peace."

"And he shall not be moved."

He opened a deep frown. "Nor shall I be denied." His stomach knotted in a wave of anger. He clenched his fists to stanch the feeling. Then he muttered, "If he rejects Gaff, he'll force me to undertake more direct action. The Pact of Four will regret their deeds." He leveled a dark stare at Thulann. "Are you willing to act with me, like you did in Braun's Needle?"

The Way Master lifted her chin. "What will you do, Sir Gabriel?"

"Everything required."

She seemed to consider the offer, but her one eye closed. "I shall not leave Turlogan's side, though he might have it otherwise."

"Then do what you must, of course," said Montenegro, "but do not stand in my way."

Thulann gazed back. "I shall stand where I stand."

Toria touched his gloved hand. "Will you go after Bahrok?"

"Stay with Thulann, little thief."

"I want to know."

"Stay with Thulann," he repeated. "You'll be far safer at her side than mine."

"I don't care about that."

He wanted to say *she needs you right now* but the old Juka's dignity did not need that blow. Instead he nudged the girl and murmured, "I'll return to you, I promise. We shall share a bottle on the cliffs of Cove and pretend nothing exists beyond the traitorous sea."

She grumbled and walked away.

He pointed a finger at Thulann. "Take him the scroll. Do your best. This is the most important task you've ever accepted. I'll return here in a few days to find out what he says."

The Way Master nodded. "Of course I shall try."

"Make it work. I know you, old woman. You're stronger than he is." When she did not respond, he motioned to Khyber. "Let's leave her to her work. She has a long night ahead of her." He turned to Thulann. "I'll be back for an answer in a few days, Way Master." He faced Toria but the girl had turned her back. "Good night, little thief."

"Montenegro," said Thulann as he departed with his companions, "do not forget your bloodline. You are a knight, not an assassin."

"I am true to the Virtues. That's all I need to be."

As they climbed over toothy ridges to reach their hidden flying machines, Master Enosh drew beside the New Britannian. "What will you do if Turlogan still declines?"

"We shall see on that day."

"It's a fair question, Cavalier."

He paused to frown at the towering weapons master. "And everyone seems compelled to ask it. But I'll answer with a question of my own. Do you want to bring an end to the Pact of Four?"

"Of course I do."

He called ahead, "Khyber! What say you?"

"My gauntlet has been hungry for a long time," answered the officer.

"Then we haven't the opportunity to consult Gaff. We must leave tonight. Bahrok's army is down the coast, not more than a day away by air."

Enosh raised his scar-cleft eyebrows. "If Turlogan changes his mind, it would be a mistake to attack Bahrok before the surrender is formalized."

"That gives us a few days to survey his encampment. Khyber has shown me the use of tactical patience. If Turlogan maintains this lunacy, then we can strike Bahrok at will."

The brigadier grinned. "The noble Montenegro learns warfare from a Technocrat of common blood. It is a triumph of the Machine and no mistake. But Bahrok is not a fish in a barrel. He's got an army of thousands and we're only ten here. Even if we had time to summon the brigade, we couldn't spare the manpower from Junction."

"But he has a weakness," said the knight. "He has secrets to keep."

"Maybe. But if we don't use assassination techniques, Cavalier, the odds of eliminating him are minuscule."

Montenegro shook his head. "I will only strike him with Honor. That is not subject to debate."

"Indeed," said Master Enosh.

Khyber grimaced, then chuckled. "Your honor is an obstacle I have learned to overcome. We'll have to find a solution that's simultaneously honorable and successful."

"A triumph of the Virtues, indeed," noted Montenegro, grinning as he started to climb. But their mood was not as light as they portrayed it. Thulann had failed. Turlogan was a glory-mad fool. Full invasion was almost inevitable. Sosaria had never seen a war of the magnitude that was blowing on the stiff ocean wind. And in as little time as a week from now, Montenegro might be forced to raise steel against his friends. By blood he was a New Britannian knight. In a war he would ride with his fellows. But before that happened he would spare no effort to eliminate the source of the conflict. Valor and Justice commanded him to do so.

8

The Behemoth

And Sir Lazaro brought his magic sword, the Talon of Covetous, to the base of a low, dark mountain. Riding with him were ten bold knights dressed for battle. The villagers watched in terror as Sir Lazaro led his men up the slopes to face an ancient dragon at the top. Day turned into night and the mountain burned with a terrible fire. When dawn broke Sir Lazaro returned. His knights had perished but the beast was no more. From its lair he had rescued a grey-eyed maiden.

The villagers celebrated his courage but he did not hear their praise. So awed was he by the beauty of the maiden that he married her that very day. He built her a home under the shelter of the black mountain. From the old tongue he assumed the landed name of Montenegro. And so in the face of Love did Sir Lazaro honor the Virtue of Humility, discarding all glory for the simple rewards of the hearth and the heart.

The passage of four nights found Montenegro and his company concealed in the mountains farther south. Dawn paled the eastern sky, transforming the peaks into a saw-tooth silhouette. Below them on the beach twinkled the

immense encampment of Clan Varang. As many as six thousand soldiers were stirring at the blue of first light. So numerous were the torches and lanterns that it seemed the pebbles of the shoreline had caught fire, one by one. The seething glow sprawled in both directions for over a mile in length. The salty wind was tinged with smoke.

A soldier arrived at Montenegro's side, panting heavily. He dropped something on the shadowy ground. The knight donned his miner's monocle and saw it was the metal tube containing Gaff's truce. He picked it up and discovered a layer of soot blackening the surface. When he opened the cap, ashes streamed into the gusty breeze.

He threw the message down and gritted his teeth. "Brigadier, the time is upon us."

The officer grunted, "And only a few years tardy."

A quarter mile south of the army lay a deep fold in the mountains. The canyon was shielded from the ocean wind by a turn in the rocky cliffs, which permitted coarse plant life to bristle in the lee. The stone walls and rubble were thick with scrub like tufted fur. Under the brushy layers reclined an ancient, steel monster.

They had not seen the decrepit machine at first, overgrown and half-buried in dust and rocks. When they did uncover its dark outline, every one of them had shivered. The metal construct resembled a squid of inconceivable proportions. Lying at the base of the slope, its rusted body was the size of a small inn, though crushed and rent by rock-slides long ago. Massive gears and pistons were visible under a coat of red, spiny moss. But the machine's many appendages constituted the greater marvel. Like giant, black tentacles they lolled up the sloping walls of the canyon, their steel frames bent to the contours of the ground. They

looked more like shadowy folds in the rock than pieces of machinery. And their scope seemed even more awesome when Master Enosh pointed out that they were not tentacles but jointed legs. This had once been an Overlord's war machine. It was called a behemoth and it had walked three hundred feet high, with a striking arm of equal length that acted like a giant war pick. The technology had vanished with the Overlords, of course, but the ruins were a reminder of what the Machine could achieve. For the Technocrat soldiers the sight elicited proud wonder. For Montenegro it stirred his bile.

They had discovered the site two days earlier in the course of their reconnaissance. Now the brigadesmen vanished into the surrounding terrain, while the officers quaffed invisibility potions from their dwindling supply and infiltrated the chassis of the behemoth. Their flying machines were concealed nearby, though Montenegro doubted they would need to reach them quickly. This action allowed for two outcomes, success or disaster. The margin for error was too small to accommodate a third result.

Inside the behemoth were the remains of what might have been a cargo bay. The large chamber, jumbled with rusted gears and chains, had a heavy door at one end that comprised the entire wall. At one time it was hinged from the top, though presently it gaped open on edge. Small breezes whirled inside, kicking up dust and the dry smell of fungus. A host of seaside fauna scrabbled through the whispering scrub.

Montenegro watched the door with anxious resolve. His body felt charged with power. The rising light of morning applied details to the canyon outside and he scrutinized every inch for signs of Juka. He kept perfectly still in his

kinetic armor, to avoid making any sounds. He regulated his breathing, though the effort was increasingly difficult.

He had dreamt of this moment for better than two years. In that time Bahrok had plotted the death of the knight and his friends, robbed him of hard-won victories, expelled his troops from the deserts of Logosia and embroiled New Britannia in costly battles to serve the warlord's greed. Montenegro despised the chieftain and he knew that the hatred was mutual. And so this would be a gift to Bahrok, as well. Both men had long craved the opportunity to cross swords. Though the brigadesmen had secured the area and Khyber and Enosh stood at his side, this morning's clash would involve just two warriors. Honor would be vindicated.

The sound of footsteps rasped outside. Montenegro tensed. Three shapes appeared at the cargo door and lifted themselves in. They were Jukan soldiers from Bahrok's command guard. The men fanned through the chamber, searching among the gears and thick grass for any signs of infiltration. They passed inches in front of Montenegro, whose invisibility served him well. Neither did they find Khyber or Enosh. After a few minutes they returned to the door and waved to someone beyond.

The body of the behemoth rocked slightly when Warlord Bahrok put his full weight into a footstep. The Jukan chieftain was a slab of a fighter, Montenegro's height and twice his mass. Bahrok wore utilitarian armor and a single sword at his hip. Imposing spars of metal adorned his helmet, which he removed almost immediately. With a grunt he dismissed the three soldiers. After they exited, he drew something from his belt and slapped it onto the horizontal surface of a large, toppled gear. In that dreary scene of rust and decay, the object glinted brightly. It was Mon-

tenegro's golden pendant in the shape of his family crest. Khyber had placed it in the warlord's pavilion while he slept last night.

The brigadier had lamented the lost opportunity for assassination. Enosh and Montenegro refused to hear his complaints.

Now Bahrok yanked another item from a sack at his waist. It was a short rod made of black crystal. Montenegro had once seen Shavade of Arjun use a similar rod to teleport herself. Jatha of Ishpur had seemed quite distressed by its existence. It was wicked sorcery, as sorcery was judged, and it must have been Chamberlain Kavah's contribution to the resources of the Pact of Four. The fact that Bahrok employed it now indicated that he had taken the bait. Montenegro and his company had watched him come to this site the day before, for some kind of private meeting. They gambled he would return here if he needed to contact his agents again. All that remained was to give him a reason. The pendant had worked flawlessly.

With luck they would strike more than just the warlord this morning. The next few minutes would tell.

The massive Juka held up the rod and growled, "Bring your foul carcasses here right now. I have something important to ask you."

A moment later the room bleached with light. Half hidden by the afterimage in Montenegro's eyes, a new figure stood before the warlord. She was short and slender, more petite than even Toria, though her presence was decidedly more intimidating. She wore leather armor that covered little. Most of her lithe form displayed sand-colored fur dashed with sable spots. Her catlike ears stood tall and alert. Strapped to her body was a multitude of weapons, crystal

blades and throwing needles and a short staff fixed to her back. Shavade of Arjun lounged on a giant gear and crossed her booted ankles. "You should try to be more polite, Warlord. I might think you're trying to flirt with me."

Bahrok's face bunched into a scowl. "Stuff that insolent tongue back inside your mouth or I shall slice it off myself. Where are the others?"

"They're busy. Are you?"

"I am about to be. With what agenda, you must inform me." He snatched up the gold pendant and held it in front of her face. "Do you have an explanation for this?"

She looked closer. "That's Montenegro's crest, isn't it?"

"Yes. I found it in my tent this morning. It was not there before. What game is this, Shavade? You told me Montenegro was dead."

"He is. Brother Rictor poisoned him. Thulann of Garron said so." She smirked. "Maybe she's the one who left it for you. They were friends, right?"

"It is not her method to play games. If she wanted to give me a message, she would do it to my face."

"What about her little human pet? Or maybe the Shirron's son? You do not want for enemies, Warlord, which must mean you're not a total failure."

He glared down at the Meer. "What talk is this? It is not I who fail on the eastern battlefields! Sartorius gives me bad intelligence."

"Don't get too puffed up. If it wasn't for Sartorius, you would have never reached the eastern battlefields in the first place."

In a blur Bahrok's hand shot forward and clamped around the Huntress's throat. She flinched as he lifted her into the air.

"You shall only speak to the questions I ask. Is that clear?"

The Meer tried to grin, though the effort looked physically challenging in her predicament. Montenegro thought the warlord might be squeezing her. But the knight had seen enough. With a deliberate thought he shrugged off the invisibility. In the shadows he took one step forward. The clatter of his armor sounded through the chamber.

Shavade became a whirl in Bahrok's hand. Montenegro swore that she cartwheeled in midair. Something shot at him and he threw his shield into its path. Tiny white spines clanked into the metal, then vanished in the electric bite of the static-charged surface. Across the room the Meer warrior landed in a crouch atop a high, ruined piston. A bulbous object perched in her hand. The Stinger, a Living Weapon from Avenosh, was lashed by a thong to the handle of the weapon. The Huntress's ears pressed flat into her tawny hair. Her eyes reflected light like an animal's.

Warlord Bahrok peered into the gloom and barked, "Who the hell are you, Technocrat? Have you something to do with this?" He held up the pendant with no hint of alarm.

Montenegro lowered his shield to his side. With measured calm he removed the helmet that concealed his face, then stepped closer to the warlord where the dawn's glow could find him. He watched Bahrok's expression as it registered his identity. The Juka displayed shock and delight in equal quantity.

The knight muttered, "No more obstacles, Juka."

"Absolutely none. Great Mother, I had thought my retribution was denied."

"Bahrok," said Shavade, "he's not the only one here."

Brigadier Khyber and Master Enosh materialized from the darkness. Bahrok tensed and glowered at Montenegro. The knight shook his head. "They will not interfere."

The Juka nodded. "Neither will she. Do you hear that, Shavade?" He glanced at the Meer, then back at Montenegro. "I shall kill you in honorable fashion in the name of my son Sigmhat, whom you murdered in cold blood."

"I shall kill you for that accusation, and for everything else," returned the knight.

"Noble vendetta," grumbled Shavade, "the lifeblood of grave robbers everywhere."

Montenegro frowned at her. Then he noticed a short braid dangling on her belt. The hair was as pale as flax. It looked human. "Where did you get that?"

She fingered the braid and smiled. "It's just a memento."

Warlord Bahrok donned his helmet again and sneered at his opponent. "So you have joined the Technocrats. I knew you for a traitor from the beginning. That mechanical gear suits you, who hid behind sorcerers for so long."

"We can strip off these weapons and armor. I shall kill you knife-to-knife, if that is your preferred end."

The warlord smirked gravely. "Keep your toys. They will sweeten the story of your demise."

Master Enosh propped his war maul on his shoulder and said, "Gentlemen, there is little room to duel in here. We should take this outside."

Bahrok shook his head. "We stay here. I do not want any of my soldiers to see or hear us. We must not be interrupted."

"Agreed," said Montenegro.

Enosh sighed. "Then draw your weapons and fight with honor."

Montenegro pulled the morningstar out of his belt. It consisted of a two-foot handle from which hung a chain and a spiked ball of iron. He twisted a heavy knob. The ball

flashed from inside. Then a globe of flame encircled the weapon, hissing as the chain swung like a pendulum.

Bahrok regarded the morningstar with amusement. "I see Blackthorn is tinkering with New Britannian weapons now. Tell me, you are the one they call 'Cavalier,' are you not? I have heard tales from the eastern fields."

"I bear the name with pride."

"I shall see that it is written on your tomb. You may rot with pride in your barbaric fashion." He drew his sword with a clatter and stood ready. "Proceed."

Montenegro thumbed a stud on the morningstar as he twirled it at the Juka. From inside the handle the chain unreeled so that the ball flung over Bahrok's shoulder. The warlord smashed his blade against the knight's shield with an ear-splitting *crack* of static charge. Then the elongated chain of the morningstar wrapped twice around Bahrok's thick neck. The spiked ball rammed into his jaw and flames billowed up his face. He roared and staggered back a step. Montenegro braced himself. The chain went taut and the knight gained control of the Juka's movements.

Or so he believed, until he discovered the power of Bahrok's huge frame. When the Juka lurched to the side, Montenegro was nearly yanked off his feet. He crouched low and leaned back, bracing the handle of the morningstar under his arm. The fire continued to sear the warlord's face as Bahrok raised his sword for another blow. It clanged upon the sturdy chain. Montenegro fought the jerk of impact. A dazzle of sparks shot from the metal links.

The knight leapt forward as Bahrok prepared another strike. Montenegro slammed the edge of his shield into the warlord's unguarded stomach, forcing the Juka to double over. The Jukan sword crashed down again but the chain had

gone slack. No damage was inflicted. Then Montenegro swept the flat of his shield into the Juka's face. The hit drove the spiked ball deep underneath Bahrok's jaw. A fan of sparks ripped across the warlord's mouth and eyes. Montenegro heard a bone break.

The knight flew backward abruptly. Bahrok had thrust his shoulder against the shield. The morningstar chain yanked taut again and Montenegro tottered off-balance. Then the warlord's blade swooped down a third time on the chain and the iron links flew into pieces. Bahrok flung off the burning ball and howled with fury. Tears poured from his scorched eyes. His face had erupted in blisters.

The massive warrior charged Montenegro, who lifted his shield in defense. Bahrok's sword hammered him backward. The static charge of the shield blackened the expensive weapon, but the Juka did not relent. Montenegro's morningstar was ruined and so the knight reached for his own sword; but the warlord's juggernaut assault permitted only defensive moves. Again Bahrok struck the shield in a crash of sparks and hot metal. Yet another blow pushed the knight back against the square teeth of a five-foot gear. On the next strike Montenegro tucked his shield under the Juka's arm and deflected the momentum of the swing. The Jukan blade clanged against the gear and Warlord Bahrok flipped over the knight's shoulder. He tumbled into a thicket of dry grasses and rusty machine parts.

In a corner of the chamber, the morningstar still burned. A patch of dry plants started to smolder. Montenegro pointed and shouted, "Put it out or the smoke will bring others!" Khyber and Enosh leapt to comply.

He whisked out his sword, then his ribs burst with pain. Bahrok had thrown a skillful kick from an awkward posi-

tion, pounding the New Britannian's chest and knocking him across the upended cargo bay. He gained his balance on a patch of empty floor and rose prepared. Impossibly, Bahrok was already atop him. He threw his shield out to parry. The warlord's blade impacted in an explosion of sparks. A metallic shriek stung both combatants. Bahrok lifted the sword again to discover that the blade had shattered. The static charge of the shield had destroyed it. The Juka flung down the hilt and drew a short dagger from his belt.

"Stop!" bellowed the knight. "Not with that. Khyber! Give him a weapon!"

The brigadier had kicked sand over the embers in the grass. The Technocrat carried steel mandibles on one arm and a shield on the other, behind which he held a static scourge. A longsword hung across his back. He glared through the slit in his helmet and answered, "No."

Montenegro snarled, "Damn you! Enosh, throw him yours!"

Without hesitation the enormous Juka tossed his hammer across the room. Bahrok plucked it from the air and wheeled to face the knight. "Did you catch your breath, you murderous gulbani?"

Montenegro opened his mouth to reply, but something seemed wrong. He hoisted the shield into guard position and its weight shifted awkwardly. He glanced down to find the steel casing split. The wooden core was bashed to splinters. With a growl he dropped it to the ground. "Proceed," he grumbled, seizing his mechanical sword with two hands. He flipped a lever on the hilt. Moving parts whirred and whined. The device was called a clockwork sword and was as much a saw as a blade. It consisted of five razor-edged

wheels in a narrow, sturdy frame. A compact engine spun the gear-driven blades at a fantastic rate, giving it tremendous cutting power. As a slashing weapon it was exquisite, though Montenegro sometimes missed the brute impact of an ordinary sword.

The kinetic hammer in Bahrok's hands was the same spring-enhanced maul that Master Enosh always used. Though the warlord was nowhere near Enosh's height, his strength looked to be equal if not greater. Luckily Montenegro's kinetic armor was most effective against blunt weapons, but even so he did not relish the thought of a solid blow. With this in mind he calculated a plan of attack.

When Bahrok hoisted the great hammer, Montenegro sprang across the ground. He rolled past the burly Juka and slashed his clockwork sword atop the side panel of a steel breastplate. The spinning wheels chewed a groove in the metal. Then the hammer fell and the knight twisted aside. The weapon pounded a thick, rusted gear lying on the floor. The corroded metal fractured into pieces. A wash of tiny creatures evacuated the space beneath it. Montenegro darted behind the Juka and stroked his sword again. The clockwork blades grated across the same cut as before.

Bahrok executed a furious pirouette. The war maul *whooshed* toward the knight, who kicked an iron pipe for momentum to leap over the formidable swing. He landed, then used a quick fencing move to tap his sword against Bahrok's side once more. This time embers sprayed from the cut. He was almost through to flesh.

Then Bahrok rotated the hammer strangely, with the head pointing down. He clutched the long handle with both hands and threw a barrage of rapid haft blows. He was using the hammer like a weighted staff. Montenegro had never

seen the style before. The knight parried with capable reflexes but the tactic concerned him. Bahrok was not supposed to be this fast. This was a practiced ruse. The Juka was distracting him into a defensive sequence. Eventually the business end of the hammer would lunge upward to catch Montenegro off guard. He did not intend to let that happen.

Then a parry missed its mark and the hammer haft cracked against Montenegro's helmet. His skull rang. He punched a counterattack but his gauntlet was empty. His clockwork sword squealed on the ground nearby, its blades sawing into a rusted gear shaft. Bahrok had disarmed him. He had used one of Thulann's moves. Montenegro snarled a curse. One of Thulann's moves!

He batted away another blow with his open palm, then dove for his weapon. He heard Khyber scream, "Watch out!" an instant before his spine erupted. Bahrok had brought down the war maul on his back. All sense of his body disappeared below the chest. Resisting the pain he snatched up his clockwork sword, then gathered the strength of his upper body to twist around. He faced up and saw Bahrok raising the hammer once again. "That's a mistake," he grunted as he thrust out his arm. The clockwork blades slashed through the warlord's armor and tore loose a spout of blood. Bahrok cried out and reeled backward.

Montenegro's legs were still numb but they responded again to commands. He planted his feet and swiftly stood. Bahrok charged him but the knight saw only the Juka's wound. It poured out a sheet of blood. One deep thrust would finish the raging troll. He tossed out a jab with expert precision, even as Bahrok's maul roared at him.

The world turned to flashes and fire. He felt himself soaring through the air. He banged against jagged machinery

and slumped across it in an undignified position. Through his scrambled vision he spotted Shavade of Arjun leaning over him. Her handsome features were drawn into a smirk. As if speaking through water she murmured, "Pity the halfwits who fight for pride or love. They never understand how pointless their death is."

Then he raised himself and slid to his feet. He saw Bahrok doubled over, growling his anger at the blow Montenegro had traded him. The warlord's strength was draining away. The knight took a step forward, then toppled. His abdomen blazed with pain. He collected himself and stood once more.

A cluster of heavy rocks thumped suddenly in front of him. They had fallen from the gloom of the ceiling. He looked down to see that they were not rocks but heads, the heads of the seven brigadesmen Khyber had stationed outside the ruins of the behemoth. Then a strapping figure landed in front of him. The man wore black kinetic armor identical to Montenegro's, though the helmet was not in place. Gabriel recognized the Juka's kelp-colored face, which was bright with a toothy grin.

"Look who's still alive," said Pikas of Enclave as he unsheathed his sword and threw a strike at Montenegro's neck. The knight got his blade in the way. When the weapons collided a great flash bathed the room. Montenegro stumbled backward from the force of the electric burst. But when the light did not fade he realized that Pikas's weapon was not the typical, static-charged design. An arc of streaming electrical power connected Pikas's blade with the clockwork sword. The long surge of energy buzzed at a deafening volume. In less than a second the clockwork mechanics threw out smoke and rending squeals. The device came apart in a snap of light, then the electrical arc was gone.

Shavade crouched with a crystal blade in hand and said, "As usual, Pikas, you're rude and late."

Montenegro looked at the smoking ruins of his weapon, destroyed in an instant. The assassin clucked at him derisively. "A clockwork sword, Montenegro? That's all you could find to replace Starfell?"

The knight answered by twitching both his arms. He had no particular attack in mind. The action was intended to keep Pikas's attention while Warlord Bahrok swung the war maul from behind. The hammer connected with Pikas's flank and tossed the assassin across the chamber. He smashed headfirst into a pipe with such force that Montenegro winced.

"Dammit, Pikas," grumbled Shavade, "now I've got to get involved." Khyber and Enosh took note.

Through his bloody, ruined mouth Bahrok said, "Vermin deserve no honor. Let us continue." Montenegro realized that the warlord's jaw was shattered, which accounted for his lack of conversation. The Juka laid down his hammer. Montenegro dropped his broken sword. The two men drew daggers and assumed guard positions.

The knight assessed his odds. The gash in Bahrok's side drained his immense strength. Montenegro still believed a solid thrust would finish the Juka. But he knew that his own wounds were severe, as well. He had abdominal injuries that would require healing very soon, before internal bleeding and damaged humors poisoned him. One good blow would finish him, as well. So the duel boiled down to defensive integrity.

But Montenegro knew how to proceed. For as long as he could remember, he had relied upon healing magic to aid him in battle. He had developed an offense-centered style

that earned him numerous, agonizing injuries, yet bore rapid damage upon his enemies. He traded personal pain for sure victory. He reasoned that he was honoring the Virtue of Sacrifice. His record in battle was vindication.

He did not know if he could be healed this time. He heard the sounds of combat as Khyber and Enosh clashed with Shavade and the bloodied Pikas. In the distance, in tandem with the hush of the sea, he imagined the cries of many Jukan warriors coming to the aid of their chieftain. Pikas must have warned them. Time was against him now. But victory was all that really mattered. He would push this dagger into Bahrok's side and the rest of the world would take care of itself.

He met eyes with the warlord. An understanding passed between them. Then Montenegro lunged.

He fainted and then his dagger penetrated the Juka's flesh, as deep as he could shove it. He saw horror flash over Bahrok's face, but it switched to stubborn anger. Bahrok gazed into the knight's eyes as he jammed his own dagger under Montenegro's rib armor. The knife point tore through sensitive tissues. Montenegro's body shot through with trauma. He felt the day darkening around him. He poured all fury into his storm-grey eyes. He glowered a lifetime of rage at Bahrok but the Juka looked back clearly, even calmly. Triumphantly.

Sir Gabriel collapsed when Bahrok removed the blade. His head lay beside those of the slain guardsmen. He seemed to notice the warlord retrieving the war maul and hoisting it high in the air. Montenegro howled at his body to move, but it disobeyed him. It disobeyed.

The hammer did not fall. Something impeded Bahrok. It was Master Enosh grappling him from behind. The war

maul fell to the ground and the two mighty Juka wrestled, then Enosh hurled Bahrok across the chamber. The warlord did not rise. Pikas and Shavade were missing. Montenegro felt himself lifted off the ground and carried outside. The barks of approaching clansmen fluttered on the ocean wind.

A healing potion bathed his mouth. His body returned in stutters. Montenegro thrust his feet underneath him and stood.

Khyber and Enosh and the knight were standing on the slope above the behemoth's ruined body. A swarm of Varang clansmen charged into the canyon, less than a minute behind them. "Go," said the brigadier and the three men hurried up the scrub-covered slope. When arrows began to clatter around them, they doubled their pace. Behind a boulder waited their flying machines. Montenegro leapt atop the mechanical horse and churned its levitant engines. When the beast rose off the ground and tucked in its hooves, he snapped out the leather control vanes and aimed for the sky. Khyber and Enosh were close behind, perched in the frames of their propeller-driven kite skids.

The clansmen and the mountains shrank below them. A landscape of low, chilled clouds replaced the terrestrial world. The trio leveled their path and steered inland, toward the blossoming sun. When they found a sure wind and steadied their flight, the brigadier maneuvered between his companions and shouted, "This is what comes of your damnable Honor!"

At that moment Montenegro was ready to kill the Technocrat, but he had no weapons to use. Neither was he confident that his limbs would respond to battle. His body had failed him today. His flesh and bones had rebelled in the midst of a critical duel, and the worst part was that he sus-

pected Honor had been satisfied. His conflict with Bahrok had been resolved according to proper form.

It occurred to him that he had left the gold pendant behind, but the loss seemed appropriate. He doubted that he deserved such good company any longer.

*"Ravens black the belfry took,
The belfry took, the belfry took,
Ravens black the belfry took
Atop the castle gold;*

*"Ravens black the belfry shook,
The belfry shook, the belfry shook,
Ravens black the belfry shook
The day my heart was sold."*

Thulann woke to the echoes of crows in her dreams. Her body tingled with energy. She climbed from her veiled bed to find Toria singing softly with Tekmhat. The two girls were dressed in sleeping gowns. They sat on a rug in the Way Master's tent, applying scrub cloths to her sand-dusted armor. Dawn had not yet brightened the fabric walls.

The old Juka shrugged on a flimsy caftan and left without a word. On bare feet she strode in the direction of Turlogan's pavilion. The breeze traced her willowy frame in loose silk. Moments later the minstrel and the Initiate caught up to her. Toria whispered, "Mistress, is something wrong?"

Thulann did not answer. Her heart thumped loudly. The dream was barely an impression in her mind, like the dimple on a bed when a person rises; but the feeling it left behind was leaden in her chest. Sleep had gifted her a moment of unclouded truth. She had seen beyond her pride and anger,

beyond her guilt and sadness, beyond the passions and politics of the moment. She had gazed past all of it and realized that Turlogan was her home. Like a dying woman she would stay with him fiercely. Like a frail old crone she would kneel and beg for clemency. Her body moved with its own resolve before her mind could override it.

She threw open the flap to his pavilion and found the bed empty. Something nagged her. The room was not disheveled but parts of it were out of place. The precise arrangement of drapes and idols was disturbed. From his weapons stand she unsheathed a short sword and pushed through the back wall.

A man stood in the bleak shadows. He wore a Technocrat's kinetic armor and held a bloody sword in his hand. A helmet covered his face. As he faded out of sight she saw the glint of Montenegro's golden pendant.

On the ground beside him lay a giant body, glittering with wounds.

"Tekmhat!" shouted the Way Master as she leapt at Montenegro, but the knight had fled the instant he became invisible. Thulann saw the two girls rush around the pavilion. The Initiate cried out and dropped to her knees, summoning a handful of scintillating flares with which to heal the fallen Shirron. Toria ran to the Way Master's side but Thulann snapped, "Fetch the master healers!" The redhead dashed into the encampment as Thulann charged away from it. She knew that Montenegro and his Technocrat soldiers must have hidden their flying machines in the ripples of the mountain. She could outrace them and wait for their arrival. Whatever was happening, they would suffer justice for it.

Minutes turned to hours as she combed the jagged slopes, but she saw no sign of Montenegro that was not many days

old. Her caftan was soaked with sweat and humidity, torn from one shoulder after several difficult climbs. The risen sun lashed her with summer heat. Braids of white hair became a loose tangle on her neck.

An army of scouts joined her in the search but the morning yielded no answers. Weighted by fatigue, she paused on a boulder overlooking the army's encampment. Faint sounds reached her ears, dancing as echoes along the hard, stony inclines of the mountain. She thought at first they might be sea birds calling out the new day's hunger. But her body turned to ice when she realized the truth. They were the wails of keeners lamenting in the Shirron's compound.

The landscape seemed to detach from her thoughts. Something swept past her on the wind, a small body with scimitar wings and a color that looked familiar. It was a New Britannian falcon hunting for the first time on Logosian shores. The fleet from Britain must be close now. The humans would find a different land than they expected. The parched ground was drinking hot blood and its thirst only seemed to be growing.

9

The Beacon

The skyward surface of the forest canopy spread to the horizon like a surreal, green ocean. At the summit of a very high tree, Jatha the wizard and Fairfax the ranger peeked over the leafy vista from their roost on a sturdy limb. The Meer squatted near the trunk of the tree, scraping bark with a knife to collect a patch of rare, dark moss. A few yards away the bearded ranger lolled in a crux of two branches, his arms crossed and his gaze cast into the distance. In a lazy voice he commented, "Jatha, I have been thinking."

"How ominous," mumbled the wizard, not looking up from his work.

"How long have we been tracking Shavade through this forest?"

"Eight days."

"And how long since we were last attacked by an oculus?"

"Five days."

"My friend, I don't think she's leading us into a trap anymore."

Jatha shrugged. "Perhaps it's very far away."

"I don't think she's leading us anywhere. She's just running for her life now. I conclude that this chase is fruitless."

"Oh, when we catch her she'll yield up some fruit. I assure you of that. You can pluck it from her branches and I shall feast to the pit."

The ranger laughed. "In truth I'm feeling uncommonly logical today. I think we should leave off the hunt and turn southeast for Britain. After all, the invasion party will be nearly gone by now. I thought you had an invitation to that wood-and-barnacle fete."

"I told you, I forfeited my role. This business with Kavah supersedes it. I notified Mistress Aurora two weeks ago."

"But you'll miss the glory of populating foreign graveyards."

"They will clog up with or without me."

"But you do it with such aplomb! Come now, I've grown weary of this pursuit. I am cured of the affliction named Shavade."

The wizard snorted a laugh. "The ancestors take pity on me at last."

"You don't believe me, do you? The fires of the soul burn hot, my friend, so hot that they sometimes expend themselves in a brief but dazzling flash of glory!" He popped open two fists to illustrate the analogy.

Jatha smirked. "That's the same excuse you used on that flower seller in Yew."

"That was different. She smoked inferior tobacco. It affected her bouquet."

"Explosions of the heart are inconsequential, Fairfax. I'm not chasing Shavade for love. Go back to Britain if your ashen soul desires, but I shall cleave to her trail."

"Ha! As though you could distinguish a footprint from a

forest sausage." Fairfax snickered to himself. "It was only a ruse, anyway. My heart shall never be free of her touch."

"I know."

The human grunted, "No, you didn't."

"I did. It's obvious when you're lying."

"It is?"

"You get a certain cadence to your words. An incriminating timbre."

Fairfax turned at the waist to stare at his companion.

"What timbre?"

"You can't tell?"

"If I could, I would change it. My life would be astronomically easier."

The Meer chuckled. "Good point."

"Well?"

"Hmm?"

"What timbre, damn you!"

"I don't know. It's just a way that you speak. It doesn't matter. I'm trying to work here, while you flap those hairy lips of yours. Why don't you get some sleep and spare me your glass-paned ruses?"

Fairfax spat in disgust from the lofty branch. Jatha ignored him and continued with his task. This patch of bloodmoss was a rare discovery in the area and he would take as much as he dared. The dark substance contributed to many of his spells of Earth and Air Magic. It would justify the effort of climbing to this precarious spot.

The ranger examined the forest to the west. The midday sun glinted on the leaves. "Do you recognize where we are?"

"These are the Valente lands, aren't they?"

"Quite so. The Valley of the Beacon lies over that hill. Did you ever visit one of Lord Valente's Wisp Hunts?"

"I watched the beacon once with Mistress Aurora. Very impressive."

"I thought it only happened in the autumn."

"So it does."

"Then we must have slept for three months last night, because I swear I just saw a light over there."

The Meer looked up. To the west the terrain acquired more relief, dipping and bobbing in serpentine ridges. A verdant, wind-tossed carpet of trees textured the majestic scene. A few miles away lurched the crest of a hill, beyond which the forest disappeared into a wide valley. Jatha recognized the landmarks. The Valley of the Beacon had a distinctive bowl shape. He also recognized the furtive lights that wheeled in and out of view beyond the hilltop. Wisps were not easily seen in the full glare of summer, but the strange geometry that guided their formations could not be mistaken for any other phenomenon.

He cinched up a small bag that now brimmed with blood-moss. "Fairfax, in what direction do Shavade's tracks lead?"

The ranger pointed toward the valley.

He tucked the bag inside a large satchel slung across his shoulder. "We'd best move on, then. There's no time to nap after all, it seems. We may just have found the trap we've been pining for."

"I pine for love today, not danger, though one could argue the difference is semantic."

They climbed down from the tall tree and pressed forward, moving quietly among the gnarled vines and branches that characterized the old wood. Hanging moss loomed in the sun-dappled canopy. A blanket of dry leaves whispered on the ground, yet neither man stirred them enough to draw attention. Soon they mounted a steep incline and peeked

over the rim of the valley. The forest grew thin below. In the center was a wide clearing in which twirled a pillar of sapphire sparkles.

Jatha studied the twisting lights with a swell of fascination. The "beacon" was a convergence of otherworldly energies, the nature of which was mysterious. The consensus among human archmages was that it represented a rift or leak in the Ether from which magical forces periodically seeped. Normally the beacon only lit one night a year. The trait revealed its kinship to wild moongates, which changed their behavior according to the phases of the moons. But the beacon's annual ignition fell on a predictable evening in autumn. Today was a brassy summer afternoon. Given the circumstances that had brought him here, Jatha felt uneasy about the incongruous event.

But the wisps were behaving as he would expect. They swooped and careened in the air above the beacon, fashioning daytime constellations of elusive volumes and angles. The shapeless entities themselves appeared as little more than shifting, shimmering lights. Their motives were unfathomed but their power was very clear. They were known to possess ancient, potent magicks. Even the Matriarchs gave them respect. Only once had a wisp been known to die in battle and the tale had become a legend. And so their muster by the hundreds around the beacon signaled an occurrence of momentous import. During the gathering in the fall the wisps performed a dance of infinite shapes and movement. They seemed to be duplicating the effort today. Jatha's human teacher, Mistress Aurora, had theorized that the wisps were conducting some manner of ritual or spell designed to influence the beacon, or perhaps the etheric rift that created it. Since the wisps had amassed today, as well,

the Meer had to wonder at their purpose. Were they here to study, or perhaps to harvest power? Or might they somehow be responsible for igniting the beacon?

And what had drawn Shavade of Arjun to the valley while this mysterious spectacle took place?

Fairfax grumbled, "This might be bad."

Jatha nodded. "It grows worse as I think about it."

"It's getting caught in my shirt now."

The wizard squinted. "Come again?"

"My hair. It's uncomfortably long." When the Meer looked at him with disdain he added, "This display of lights is quite magnificent, I grant you, but natural beauty must assume its proper subservience to my personal comfort."

"Your mind is a cozy place, isn't it? Slice off your hair if it bothers you, then kindly rejoin me in the outside world."

"I don't want to cut it. I'm growing it to please Shavade."

"Your persistence would shame a horsefly."

"It needs a braid. Can you make one for me?"

Jatha growled, "Do I look like a handmaiden to you? There's a serious matter in front of us!"

"Show some backbone! It is only emasculating if you tell someone else. I can't do it myself, backward and behind my head and all."

The Meer grimaced. "All right. Turn around." The ranger faced away and Jatha grabbed a lock of the human's shoulder-length, flaxen hair. Then he drew out his knife and positioned it for a trim.

The ranger heard the noise and cried, "Hey!" He leapt away and rolled through the brambles, finishing on his back. Jatha shook his head and turned to watch the lights in the valley.

From the underbrush Fairfax said, "By the orchids of Bordermarch, that is the most beautiful sight I have ever seen."

Jatha looked at his companion. The ranger lay on his back. He was staring up the length of a slender pair of legs, sleek with rich, spotted fur. The Huntress Shavade stood over the human with a long, crystalline quarterstaff in her hands. Her attention focused on Jatha. "Welcome, Firstborn. Let me show you my own sleeping spell."

She slammed the butt of her staff into Fairfax's brow, shoving his head down into the brambles. Then she braced against the pole and used it to propel her nimble body forward, directly at Jatha. To free his hands the wizard flung the knife at her, though he had little skill for it. She deflected the dagger with a limber kick. He plucked a seed of lightning from the sultry air as she landed a foot before him. Her staff plunged toward his neck. The bolt of electricity burst out from his hand and caught the warrior in the stomach. The blast heaved her backward as thunder pealed across the forest. A tendril of smoke followed her into the underbrush. Her own strike had not landed, to his considerable relief.

He prepared a second thunderbolt when he realized her trick. She had not aimed the staff at his throat but rather at the strap of his shoulder-slung satchel. The bag was now gone, flipped away into the tangled bushes. Without the bloodmoss and other diverse contents, Jatha's range of spells was severely restricted. Of course Shavade had known that. As an Avenosh Hunter she was trained to battle sorcerers. She was versed in the effects and timing of all lesser circles of magic. Without his reagents Jatha could not draw upon the greater circles. And now Shavade had vanished again, somewhere in the tangled forest.

By instinct Jatha conjured a whirlwind around himself and was rewarded a second later. A volley of crystal daggers streaked at him from above. The whorl of air cast away the

blades. The wizard's hair and leather clothes danced in the whistling funnel.

He was ready when she attacked again, springing down from a tree limb over his head. Hunters fought close and swiftly to overwhelm a wizard, in order to reduce the opportunity for spellcasting. Jatha knew he had to keep her at bay or finish her quickly. He thrust out another lightning bolt, hoping to knock her from the air before she landed atop him. But impossibly she parried the spell out of her path. Then she fell upon him, her weight disrupting the whirlwind, and smashed a kick on his lightly armored sternum. Jatha growled as he fell into the dirt. Shavade landed on his chest like an imp and blew on his face. Some manner of dust invaded his nose. He struggled to breathe but his throat rejected the notion. Without a voice, he realized with rising panic, he could not cast any spells.

She had sprayed him with saravan powder, a special concoction used by Hunters for just this purpose. Jatha cursed himself for being unprepared, but he had been away from Avenosh for nearly a decade. His reflexes were attuned to the fighters and fauna of New Britannia. And Shavade seemed quite dangerous even for a Hunter.

She punched him in the face several times before he threw her off his chest. His head throbbed and reeled. He coughed and frantically rolled to his feet. From his belt he drew a small rod that instantly shot out forks of magic power. But he did not aim the wand at her. Shavade was too alert to Jatha's attacks. However, he had one resource she could not predict. He had Fairfax. The wand propelled a healing spell atop the unconscious ranger. As Fairfax awoke and sprang off the ground, Shavade brandished a longsword and thrust it at the wizard. Jatha lunged aside. The blade that nearly

punctured his chest gleamed as black as obsidian. Its length was inscribed with mystic runes. Jatha knew the weapon. It was the enchanted blade Starfell, property of the Valente family and once carried by Sir Gabriel Montenegro. How Shavade had acquired it he did not want to guess.

He forced down a breath, though it was not enough to power a chant. Then Starfell slashed across his abdomen, rocketing pain through his body. The wand of healing toppled from his grasp. She smashed a kick against his skull and he crumpled. The last image he glimpsed was Fairfax standing with sword in hand, doing absolutely nothing except to gape at the pretty Meer warrior.

Unpredictable indeed, thought Jatha as darkness consumed him.

He woke with a throb in his wrists and arms. The world seemed unstable, shifting, and he saw why when he opened his eyes. Shavade had tied his wrists and ankles behind his back and hung him from a tree branch. Bent backward into an uncomfortable circle, he dangled knees-down four feet above the earth. A mound of animal droppings lurked below him. "Charming," he muttered.

He was stripped to his kidskin breeches, bereft of weapons and magical reagents. He had mastered a few spells that worked without physical components, but they required precise hand gestures. Shavade had bound his fingers with the meticulous skill of a Hunter. Magic would not aid him now. A rush of helplessness soured his mood even more.

At least she had healed the wound to his stomach. Apparently she had some agenda for him.

From the slant of the terrain he knew that she had brought him deeper into the valley. He was suspended at the

edge of a hand-cut clearing, though he faced out into the woods and could not see any other signs of life. He resolved to use what few resources remained to him. That meant guile. His voice rasped from the saravan powder as he called out, "Am I to be roasted over an open flame or cooked in a bed of coals? Or perhaps my coffin will be made of dough and you're having wizard pie for breakfast?"

From the clearing behind him Shavade replied, "You'll know if I'm going to eat you, because I'll fatten you up first. I don't like rangy meat."

"Where's Fairfax?"

"He got away from me. He runs fast for a human."

Jatha relaxed significantly. He smiled. "Sometimes I wonder if he's human at all. He moves like a spider in the forest. It's almost unnatural."

"The human rangers learned their best skills from us."

"Fairfax is better than we are. I've watched him stalk wildcats with nothing more than a club. When he's bored he'll pick off bats with throwing knives. It's very nearly disquieting."

The warm breeze conveyed vague, sour smells. Shavade's small footsteps shuffled around the clearing. In a calm tone she said, "Your bluster is manly, Firstborn, but don't imagine you're making me skittish. He's going to try to rescue you and when he does, he's a dead man."

"I see. So you're keeping me alive as bait?"

"For the moment."

He grunted. "Then as long as we're just waiting, why don't you tell me what's going on with the beacon down there?"

She laughed. "You'd have me give that information to a hostile wizard? I'd sooner bake my Stinger in a pie."

"I don't seem to be in a position to take advantage of the knowledge."

"Choke on it, Mystic."

The wizard grumbled, then steadied himself with a deep breath. "I looked after your Stinger as best I could manage. I had no idea what it eats, but certain bugs sated it."

"Thank you." She sounded grudgingly sincere.

"Where's Chamberlain Kavah?"

"He'll come when he can."

He tried to move his fingers, but they had gone numb in their elaborate binding. He felt his shoulders weakening as his weight stretched the joints. A pang in his wrist made him wince. Trying to ignore the discomfort he commented, "How interesting that you carry Starfell now. Where did you come by it?"

"You don't want to find out."

"Show some mercy. Any conversation will be an improvement over staring at this pile of dung beneath me."

"You think so?"

Something pushed his kneecap. He was dangling by a single rope and the touch started his body turning. Slowly the clearing behind him rotated into view. First he saw Shavade standing nearby, pulling back the crystal staff she had used to nudge him. Next he spotted an opulent carriage at the mouth of a forest road. It glittered with glass bangles that shifted in a delicate wind. The Valente crest was inlaid on the door. Two horses lay dead on the ground in front of it, large, dark mounds in a nest of dried leaves.

Three human corpses littered the clearing, as well. Two of them wore chain mail hauberks and tabards with the Valente crest. The third looked to be a New Britannian lady. Her expensive dress bunched into peculiar shapes where she had

fallen. From her silver hair Jatha judged her to be elderly, though he could not see her face. Black streaks painted all three bodies, the bloody marks of a brutal attack. Summer flies had begun to descend.

Jatha scowled at the diminutive Huntress. "You're a monster, Shavade."

She laughed again and crossed her arms. "You left your own trail of dead enemies all the way back to Cove. You've got no right to chastise me." She glanced over at the slain woman. "That's Lady Valente, of course. Apparently when the wisps showed up she rushed out here to see them. She was waving the magic sword around like a madwoman. I have no idea why. Probably some barbaric superstition. Simple enough to put an end to it, really."

The wizard grumbled, "Her late husband used to greet the wisps every year when the beacon lit. He would salute them with that sword. Are you aware that Starfell is the only blade known to have slain a wisp? I think Lord Valente saw it as a peace gesture."

"Or maybe as a warning."

Jatha examined the carnage to look for anything that might help him escape. He saw no sign of his own equipment. Lady Valente's guards had carried halberds, which leaned now against the back of the carriage. The sight of the dead men saddened him, but when he gazed at the slain noblewoman his anger started to boil. For his own good he turned away and muttered, "Why are you here, Hunter? You come from a proud company. You know Kavah's work is evil. What did he promise you in exchange for all these crimes?"

"Only to fulfill my every dream."

"I don't want to know what you might dream."

She smiled and cradled her staff against the elegant line of her cheek. "My dreams aren't that different from yours, Firstborn. I just do a little more to make them come true."

Abruptly she let out a shriek and rolled across the ground. Jatha startled and tracked her to the limit of his sight. An arrow stuck through one of her calves. Most of the shaft protruded from the exit wound. As the Huntress snapped the arrow in two and removed it, a familiar voice shouted from the billows of an oak tree across the clearing:

*"You make my heart swell
A hundred miles in girth!"*

Jatha grinned, even though the moment was dire. Shavade hurled a crystal knife into the thick foliage of the oak tree and then leapt upward, snatching the limb from which Jatha dangled. Her balanced weight hardly shuddered the rope. He heard her climbing and felt a small rain of leaves around him. Then more whizzing noises erupted from the oak tree. Three *thunks* sounded overhead. Shavade gasped. Blood drops splattered down.

*"You impregnate my soul;
To Love I shall give birth!"*

"Shut up!" howled the Huntress in anguish. Jatha sensed her scrambling through the tree like a squirrel, rushing to engage Fairfax face-to-face. But another volley of arrows flew and Shavade of Arjun dropped to the ground in the clearing. She staggered to her feet. Arrows jutted in neat clusters from her right shoulder and her left thigh. The warrior snarled and unsheathed Starfell. To Jatha's dismay she

turned in his direction and charged, bellowing, "He's killed you, the fool!"

An arrow smacked into her sword arm. Starfell skidded across the ground. The wounded Shavade lost her balance and sprawled onto her face.

*"You're a star overhead;
You light up my path!"*

With a loud curse the Huntress plucked the rod of black crystal from her belt. Jatha grimaced at losing it. She raised the shard into the air. Sparkles danced over its length and then poured down to engulf her. An instant later she was gone.

Fairfax helped Jatha down from his binding and handed him the satchel of spell components. The shirtless wizard draped it over his shoulder. From inside he retrieved a leather cord, which he used to secure the bag redundantly to his belt.

The ranger chuckled, "I think you're right. She didn't like the song."

"And that was your best delivery yet. But why didn't you put her down, dammit? One shot to the spine is worth a hundred to the leg. That's twice you've shown her mercy and nearly at the cost of my neck!"

"You know why. I can't risk killing her, despite these murders."

Jatha clenched his fists. "But your sick heart shall be the death of me! I've had about all I can stand of it."

"That's unkind, after I just saved your life. But you have endured a lot of strain, so I forgive you."

"Hand me back to Shavade. At least greed and bloodlust

are rational motives." He rubbed his wrists to generate some feeling in his hands again. Then he glanced at Fairfax. "I see you managed to braid your hair while I hung there like a draining pig."

The human fingered a short knotwork that thrust down from his yellow mop. "In combat a man must be self-sufficient. Alas, she never even saw it." He slid his foot under the carpet of leaves and kicked. The black shape of Starfell sprang into the air. He snatched the hilt and said, "Look what she left us, though."

"We can use it to disacquaint her head and her shoulders. You see what she did to Lady Valente."

Fairfax took in the bloody scene again. He closed his eyes and sighed. "But she has the black crystal now. That ruins any chance of tracking her, I suppose."

"It may be as well. We might have our hands full elsewhere." He motioned to the glittering beacon in the center of the valley. It had begun to shudder as if it were unstable. Jatha had noticed the change when Shavade activated the black crystal, and the effect had since increased. He believed he knew what was happening. Shavade's teleportation had disrupted the local substance of the Ether. If the disturbance had spread outward, the rift that caused the beacon might have shaken open even more. The result would be unpredictable. Judging from the frantic reaction of the wisps, it might even be disastrous. "We had better leave the valley," he suggested as the wisps darted through the air in patterns too complex to follow.

Fairfax was already backing up. "I defer to your judgment. Your cowardice is better informed than mine."

Then the beacon seemed to fly apart as if the air ripped open. Blinding scintillae shot out in all directions. In the

midst of the display appeared many dark shapes. As they resolved in the glare Jatha realized that they were oculuses, trained Ishpurian war monsters, looking like giant ticks with a single eye for a body. The flying creatures poured from the beacon by the dozens. The soaring wisps descended and the two hovering swarms began a sorcerous battle that shook the forest with explosions and thunder. Light and dark spots wheeled and clashed and snapped with power. There seemed to be no end to the oculus invasion as more streamed out to replace those slain by the wisps. Embers fell and smoked in the trees. The ground itself shuddered, though none of the combatants touched the earth.

When the battle expanded over their heads, Jatha shoved his companion toward the rim of the valley. "This is an unfortunate place to be and it will only get more so."

Then something changed in the character of the beacon itself. A solid glow appeared, catching Jatha's attention. When he stared for a moment he recognized that the light was in the shape of a man. Slowly the figure solidified. Standing in the midst of the otherworldly melee was a Meer in a sorcerer's colorful robes. The man engaged a spell that drew the sparkling beacon around him like a halo. The wisps redoubled their attacks on the oculus swarm.

Fairfax whistled. "I think our Chamberlain Kavah has arrived."

Jatha felt his anger rising again. He tested the firmness of the knot on his satchel. The bag felt snug. He smacked the ranger on the back and said, "I'd get away if I were you."

Fairfax murmured, "You're not going down there!"

"He's right in front of me. I can't let him get away."

"Look at the bastard! He's commanding those gazers like a personal army! You'll be cinders before you get close."

"The oculuses are busy distracting the wisps. He's doing something else with the beacon. I'm going to stop him."

"Are you mad, Jatha?"

The wizard smirked grimly. "My heart calls out to me and I must answer. I am no madder than you."

Fairfax widened his eyes, then popped the flat of Starfell's blade against his palm and laughed, "Well spoken, you marble-headed romantic! Lead on!"

Under cover of the smoking trees they sneaked closer to Chamberlain Kavah. When they were less than twenty yards away, Fairfax nocked an arrow and said, "Light me. We'll strike from surprise before he can toss up any defensive enchantments. And keep your head down, you troll!"

Jatha smiled and answered, "The wizards of Ishpur conduct themselves differently." The ranger watched in surprise as Jatha stepped into plain view of Kavah. He lifted both hands in the air and summoned into them the seeds of many lightning bolts. When he cracked them open the woods blinked in a white glow. The lightning burst from the valley and carved up the sky. In a haze of aftersmoke the wizard called out, "Chamberlain Kavah! I am Jatha Sayarukan, First-born of Hidasah and Secular Heir to the House of Ramishpur! I see the wickedness in your deeds and I've come to take you to task!"

"Wizards have no inkling of guile," mumbled the ranger.

The man in the beacon gazed at Jatha with eyes aglow. His very long ears flattened in anger. "Stay your wrath, Sayarukan! My work here is delicate!"

"Not so delicate as your flesh shall be when I carve it into pieces!" He called upon the highest circle of sorcery he had achieved. Mistress Aurora had instructed him in the hybrid arts of Crystal Magic, where Earth and Air intersected.

Much of the discipline's focus involved the binding of spells into gemstones. But in dealing with such fundamentals of magic Jatha had also learned how to disrupt ordinary, unbound enchantments. Presently he conjured into his arms a cloud of crystal splinters that thirsted for magic like a sponge. He chanted loudly and the splinters billowed at Kavah. When they entered the beacon they began to absorb power. When they had drained enough, Kavah's sorcery would be momentarily dispelled. At that point he would fall to a single arrow from Jatha's bow.

Except that the splinters drank their fill with no discernible effect. Jatha sent more at the chamberlain and again the attack failed. The crystal splinters rang loudly and shattered. Chamberlain Kavah spread out his arms and laughed, "You have no concept of the power here! Yet it can be yours as well if you join me, Firstborn!"

Jatha answered with a more direct attack. He pointed his hands toward the earth and reached his mana downward. Like sorcerous claws his spell gouged out stone and earth and roots and dragged them upward in a great swell. The ground puckered and split underneath Kavah. The beacon itself was engulfed in a rising column of earth. Jatha strained to keep control of the mighty spell even as many oculuses turned their fury against the mound that swallowed their master. The creatures lobbed balls of fire at the earthen pillar. The young wizard ground his teeth with exertion. Mana streamed through him in raging torrents and shook him to the bones. He could not channel this much power for long, but for now the magical trap was holding. He hoped the wisps might come to his aid.

Then he felt a choke in the stream of mana. His sorcery stuttered or coughed and his body raked with agony. He

fought to maintain control but his spell began to collapse. The earthen pillar shot through with glowing cracks and then flung apart with a stupendous crash. The world reeled. Jatha fell back. Kavah remained inside the glittering swirl of the beacon, though his demeanor had hardened noticeably.

"Very well, Sayarukan," said the chamberlain and began to glow more brightly.

Fairfax leapt to his companion's side. He grabbed Jatha's arm and pulled. "I've decided I like your first plan better. Let's indulge in the sin of retreat."

"Too late!" hissed Shavade of Arjun as she appeared next to the ranger. She fluttered a pair of crystal swords in the air around him. Fairfax ducked and dodged with nimble moves and whisked Starfell from his belt. When he parried one of her blades, the crystal split. It shattered on the second blow. The Huntress cartwheeled backward and crouched low.

"Fall back, my goddess, for I don't wish to skewer you!"

"It doesn't matter at this point, does it?" She looked up at the sky, which was sheeting with light. No, thought Jatha, not the sky but the valley. Chamberlain Kavah had conjured a spell that filled the terrain with sorcerous energy. Jatha felt the strength draining from his body. Kavah was sucking up all the mana in the area. Fairfax teetered as well. Then the ranger let loose a defiant cry and sprang at Shavade. Their swords clanged a dissonant chorus and abruptly he pressed against her. With a quick move he touched a kiss to the warrior's lips. An instant later she kicked him solidly in the abdomen, propelling him back to Jatha's side.

The Meer wizard suffered an overwhelming ache. His

mana was nearly gone. The day was lost again but with effort he shouted, "By the Ar'Kannor, you are a genuine god of lust!"

Fairfax grimaced and spat blood. "I'm more than that," he replied and slapped something into Jatha's hand. It was the black crystal rod that Shavade had carried.

"You pickpocket!"

"Use it! Get us out of here!"

The valley roared with Kavah's spell. Jatha's body faded into helplessness. Even Shavade was succumbing now, shrieking as she toppled to the ground. But the rod in Jatha's hand was a vastly greater evil. He bared his teeth and said, "I won't do it!"

"You will! Jatha, if you don't, Kavah wins right now!"

The chamberlain floated above the sundered earth. His body and the beacon had become one, a fountain of sorcerous power that pushed back the wisps and caused oculus bodies to burst into flames. From Jatha's chest boiled a howl of anger as he channeled the last of his magic into the black rod. The boundless power that filled the valley gave way to flashes of pure white. Jatha and Fairfax were engulfed in scintillae.

When the clamor of the valley abruptly halted, the wizard felt a groan like the rocking of a ship. It was the Ether itself, he knew, protesting its crude violation.

Then the flashes dissipated. They found themselves on the floor of what looked like a voluminous cave. The ceiling was shored by wide, stone arches. The floor was a mosaic of granite tiles, etched with swirling designs. Braziers threw amber light into the dank, stuffy air.

A large, round table sat in the center of the floor. Around it collected a group of Meer men wearing the layered, gos-

samer robes of sorcerers. They stared at Jatha and Fairfax in surprise.

"Um, where are we?" whispered the ranger.

Fighting the pain that gripped his body, Jatha answered, "An old Terathan cave. We must be somewhere in Avenosh." He squeezed his eyes shut and moaned. He had not known how to control the rod, which remained in his grip. He had simply charged the device with power. They had teleported an extremely great distance, which meant the damage to the Ether would be great as well. His gut twisted with anguish.

Fairfax swallowed and said, "Oh. Avenosh. That's unexpected."

One of the Meer sorcerers called out, "What's this about? Who are you?"

When Jatha gave no answer Fairfax announced, "This is Jatha Sayarukan, Firstborn of Dasadahaha and, um, Second Heir to the House of . . . uh . . ."

"Never mind," rasped Jatha.

An old sorcerer frowned. "Does Kavah know you're here?"

"Damn," grumbled the human, "they're his men. Can you walk?"

"No."

"Hang on to me, then. We're going to try retreating again. Who knows, it might work this time."

Jatha felt himself hoisted over his companion's shoulder. The action loosed a staggering pain through his body. He moaned aloud as Fairfax smiled, "Kavah is occupied but he sends his love. Good day to you gentlemen!" Then darkness enfolded the wizard once more, bringing a welcome relief from his torment.

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He heard the sound of sloshing water. His feet were cool and wet. Jatha parted his eyelids and saw that he was lying across Fairfax's shoulders. The ranger waded through black, swampy water to his waist. The Meer's boots dragged through the slime, collecting a drapery of thick algae. Stale humidity lingered above the surface. Insects choked the air. Exotic squawks and chirps clamored around them. Overhead loomed a vault of greenery, a mosaic of broad, dark leaves that did not grow in New Britannia. This was a marshland in northern Avenosh. Jatha had seen such jungles when he was young, though they were too dangerous for a Mystic child to visit past the daylight hours.

He glimpsed fragments of a moon through rare gaps in the canopy. Night was a bad time to be moving through an Avenosh swamp. In a cracked voice he muttered, "What are we doing?"

"Retreating," said Fairfax.

"We should stop till dawn. It's not safe here."

"It's less safe that way, toward the caves." He pointed behind them with his thumb. "They're still looking for us."

"Kavah's sorcerers?"

The ranger nodded. "And their gazers."

"How long have we been running?"

"Can't see the stars in this pit of a forest, so I'm not really sure. Thirteen, fourteen hours. Maybe more."

Jatha groaned weakly. "It's a jungle, not a forest. Fairfax, you have to rest."

"Nope. Shavade stayed ahead of us for more than a week. I have my pride to think about."

The Meer wanted to protest further, but fatigue and soreness overtook him. Instead he mumbled, "Pride is not a Virtue," and drifted back to sleep.

* * *

"Wake up, Jatha," whispered the ranger in an urgent tone. The wizard squinted at a sunbeam that punctured through the trees. He was laid out on a cradle of interlaced roots that suspended him above the swamp water. Fairfax knelt beside him with Starfell in hand. The black blade shimmered with gore. The wizard saw coin-size reptile scales stuck in the blood. The ranger himself had red drips trailing from his nose and mouth.

Somewhere nearby, a very large animal roared with fury.

"Made a friend?" coughed the wizard. His flesh still ached terribly.

"Shut up and be honest. Are you strong enough to heal me?" He held up his left arm. The small bone of his wrist was broken.

Jatha evaluated his own mana. Chamberlain Kavah had ripped the sorcerous energy from him, doing untold damage to his body in the process. He closed his eyes and tried to conjure a simple spell. He was answered with stinging pain. His hands would barely move. "Damn. I can't do it. Drink a potion."

"I used the last one yesterday. Your healing wand is missing, too." The human rubbed sweat and grime from his eyes, then tucked his injured forearm under the strap of his half-full quiver. "Never mind. Stay quiet and keep those mule ears sharp. And as long as you're awake, try to eat something." He pushed a hardtack biscuit into Jatha's palm. Then he clutched Starfell and stood, peering through mossy vines in the direction of the roaring animal. "Don't worry. I think he's had about all he can take."

"Wait. How long did I sleep?"

"Three days and sixty miles. A hundred if you don't count delirium as waking, but I estimate you were as lucid as I've

seen you in years." He twinkled a grin and leapt through the tangled undergrowth.

Jatha tried to get the biscuit to his lips, but could not manage the task. He would have to forestall his hunger and hope that Fairfax killed the angry beast in time for dinner.

The skyward surface of the jungle canopy spread to the horizon like a surreal, green ocean. At the summit of a very high tree, Fairfax the ranger and Jatha the wizard relaxed on a sturdy limb. Fairfax was skinning a fat, predatory snake. The serpent was spiked to the branch by a throwing knife, in the same place the ranger had discovered it stalking their treetop beds. Jatha reclined at a juncture where one branch became two. The Meer folded his hands behind his head and watched the gathering sunset. "Fairfax," he said, "I've been thinking."

"How bodeful," mumbled the human, not looking up from his work.

"How long have we been traveling this swamp?"

"Twelve days."

"And how long since we were last attacked by an oculus?"

"Seven days."

"My friend, I don't think they're following us anymore. I think they've abandoned us to the jungle."

"It's probably as lethal as any executioner's axe."

"You're more correct than you know. I'm convinced now, this swamp is one that extends all the way to the northern coast. It's brimming with old magicks from before the Cataclysm. It's easy to get lost here. They used to call it the Swamps of Deceit."

"Charming. But we have a problem if you want to reach the northern coast. I've been steering us southward."

"No, that's perfect. Ishpur lies to the south. You can visit the city that spawned me and take your vengeance for the act."

Fairfax stared over the treetops to the southern horizon. "We have a long way to go. I don't suppose you want to try walking again?"

"I might just manage it this time. I'm almost as strong as a kitten now."

"Good, because I'm not going to carry you another yard. All that fur gets heavy when you're wet."

Jatha chuckled. "You forget, I can tell when you're lying."

"One day you must tell me your secret. You're right, I wouldn't leave you behind. Someone has to buy the wine when we reach Ishpur."

"Wine? You gave up drink to woo Shavade. Have you finally surrendered that infatuation?"

The ranger smirked. "Fill my cup, barkeep, and aim me at the lasses."

"They grow no finer than in Ishpur. But look, I just noticed that your braid is missing. Personal comfort overtook aesthetics, I see."

He shook his head. "I lost it in the fight with Shavade. Sliced clean off. Better my braid than my neck, eh?"

"You should have asked her to trim that beard, as well. Meer children can be easily frightened."

"Maybe I'll be their boogeyman and scare them into behaving. If someone had done that for you, we might be sharing a draught at the Blue Boar right now. How am I so fortunate to travel with a mad, crusading wizard? I'd trade every Meer in Sosaria right now for one frothy mug of stout."

Jatha chuckled. Of course it was another lie. The beer at

the Blue Boar tavern was not worth a lame-winged mong-bat, much less a Meer. Watering the stout would improve it. But as with any alehouse, the appeal of the Blue Boar lay not with the drink but the fellowship. When the company was good, everything else was bearable. That, Jatha decided, was the primary lesson of hedonism. Everything else was froth.

10

Assassins

Raveka stepped on bare feet through the gloom of the ship's cabin. Her miner's monocle replaced the darkness with the illusion of sepia light. The floor heaved gently with the rocking of the ocean, drawing a low, ponderous croak from the timbers of the flagship *Samlethe*. The contents of the cabin shifted back and forth with lazy calm. Stars peeked between opaque curtains.

The cabin was well-appointed, even for an officer's quarters. It was spacious and sturdy, fitted with a fine desk and bed, sealed tightly enough that the atmosphere was not choked with salt and mildew. The door had a lock tooled anew for this voyage. Raveka possessed a copy of the key, though she would not have needed it to enter. She could pick the lock if necessary. Nothing would keep her from the information in the chamber's desk.

On the bed lay a strapping knight, snoring with vigor. Raveka smiled at Lord Gideon. He was handsome even in the sepia monochrome. She considered leaning down to kiss his brow, but as usual she thought better of it. She could not play with toys when serious work awaited her.

She turned away, then glimpsed herself in a tall mirror. The sight made her pause. She was long and sleek, like a stalking cat. Her clothes were black and close-fitting. She wore knee-length breeches and a long-sleeved shirt, both of them men's apparel. They were less than comfortable but they suited her needs when she sneaked around the big ships of the fleet. On the *Samlethe* and a few others she kept a hidden stash of these garments. After sunset she swam between the ships and changed into the dry clothes before undertaking the night's chores. Never once had she been in danger of discovery.

But looking in the mirror, her eyes were mostly drawn to the arrangement of her hair. To infiltrate the fleet she had cut it very short, just a few inches from her head. The style was not unlike the one she had worn years ago, when Logos was her only home. It was now dyed a sandy blond, to further divert suspicion.

She had left Lady Aria far behind in Britain. Her hair was a frequent reminder. The woman who traveled with the invasion fleet was coarser, tougher and distinctly more dangerous. She acted in the name of Logos and the Machine. She was a Technocrat and she would die to save her people from harm.

The teakwood desktop was empty save for a small cup, inverted to keep it from sliding. Gideon always took his nightcap here after locking up his documents. He was obligingly methodical. From her pocket Raveka selected a key. She unwrapped its fabric winding, then tapped it with her fingers to loosen the oily coating. She inserted the key into a particular drawer, waited for the oil to seep into the mechanism and tenderly unlocked it. Inside the drawer was Lord Gideon's journal. He kept in the book a strict account of

strategy and logistics as the New Britannian officers slowly evolved their plans. Raveka had come to his cabin several times a week to update her mental records. The information would prove golden to the Technocrat defenders.

Another tiny key released the journal's hasp. The monocle allowed her to read in the dark. She studied the pages with uncanny speed and committed every line to memory. Her training as a Mathematician served her espionage tremendously.

When finished, she restored the desk to its original state. She paused to review what she had read, using precise mnemonic techniques to ensure that nothing would slip. Then she prepared to leave. Three more vessels awaited her infiltration tonight. The armada was only a few days from the Logosian coast and her work had become critical.

Her nose wrinkled. A familiar smell came to her, sharp and subtle. She traced it to the inverted cup from which Gideon had drunk before bed. She raised her eyebrows. The wine had been drugged. Gideon was presently sedated. She had not done it herself, of course, and given the particular drug used she presumed this was General Nathaniel's handiwork. But why would Nathaniel drug Gideon?

The answer might be simple to discover. Keeping an eye on the snoring nobleman, she climbed atop his desk and reached for the ceiling. During the three weeks of the journey she had managed to cut a small hole in the timber. The cabin above belonged to General Nathaniel. From here she could watch and listen to him, though the effort was rarely very illuminating.

She removed the false knothole and peered up. Nathaniel's cabin was the largest on the ship, designed with enough room to accommodate officers' meetings. Such a

gathering was taking place now, though at first she did not recognize the participants. After a moment she realized what she was seeing. Her long body shuddered from head to toe.

Around a small table sat General Nathaniel, Warlord Bahrok, Chamberlain Kavah and Lector Sartorius. The whole of the Pact of Four was assembled above her. The fifth person in the room was a petite Meer warrior bristling with weapons. Raveka assumed it was Shavade of Anjur, though her glimpse of the woman at Cove had been fleeting. Otherwise the cabin was empty and doubtless locked up solidly.

Nathaniel had sedated Lord Gideon to prevent him from eavesdropping. But he had given the opportunity to Raveka instead. She observed the meeting with razor-sharp attention.

The Meer sorcerer named Chamberlain Kavah was speaking to the others. He wore colorful robes not unlike those of the Ishpurian ambassador's entourage. His voice was rich and confident in the manner of diplomats, though his words revealed trepidation. "Sartorius, where is your man Pikas? I thought he was the security expert. He should be here for this."

Warlord Bahrok interjected with a stern voice and a thick, pointed finger. "I shall not allow that madman to disrupt this meeting! He is sadistic and undisciplined. Shavade will suffice as a watchdog, provided that the general has kept this room secure."

Nathaniel was his usual, ageless self. His long braids slung over an opulent tunic. He spoke with a neatly bearded smile. "We are safe to speak freely, gentlemen, and I must say I am pleased to finally meet you face-to-face. Warlord, of course I

remember your visit to Britain two years ago, though we did not have the pleasure of an introduction in those dark days. Chamberlain, Your Excellency, I am honored to clasp your hands. History will remember this hour with wonder."

"History need not record this meeting," remarked Lector Sartorius. He was a spectre of an old man, his black Theorist's raiment hooded and full. His skin, like all high-ranking Technocrats, was a filigree of mathematical tattoos. His voice was gruff and very cold. His presence churned Raveka's bile. "Secrecy is a cornerstone of the Pact of Four. Yet it has been neglected with considerable impunity. Might I open this discussion with a comment on how this failure has damaged our cause?"

General Nathaniel nodded and sighed. "Yes, I'm aware of my own failure in this, for which I apologize. Might I point out, however, that no disclosures on my part can explain the current Technocrat victories in eastern Logosia. Someone has discovered you, Lector Sartorius, and not because of me. I did not know your identity until this very night."

"General, my own security is beyond doubt. The only agents who know me are also known to you. The breach did not come from my organization."

Nathaniel retorted, "But someone started second-guessing the battle plans you're giving to Bahrok. Otherwise your troops would not be harrying him in the eastern desert."

"It is Lector Gaff of the Mathematicians who moves against me. I am taking steps to eliminate his threat."

Abruptly Bahrok leaned his tremendous weight forward. The action drew the attention of the table. The Juka's demeanor became heated. "I am not certain I appreciate your implication, General! My warriors in the east are not

incompetent. We operate with poor intelligence, not with unsound tactics. And let me say that your confessed security failures, Nathaniel, have affected me in a very personal way that compels me to require immediate compensation."

Chamberlain Kavah spread out his hands and said, "Gentlemen, let us not rush into these negotiations with the haste of emotionalism. We'll have the opportunity to address each of our concerns. We are businessmen. Let us apply ourselves to the compact between us."

Nathaniel shook his head. "With all respect, Chamberlain Kavah, I must ask that Warlord Bahrok explain the remark he just made."

The warlord grumbled, "There is nothing to explain. There is only this." He slapped an object on the table. From her perspective Raveka could not see what it was, but General Nathaniel drew back in surprise.

"That's the Montenegro crest! Where did you get that?"

"From the black knight himself. He came to kill me yesterday. He failed."

When Nathaniel lifted the gold object into Raveka's view, her every muscle seized with shock. It was Gabriel's pendant, the one he would not allow her to remove. So Gabriel truly had attacked Bahrok. And what had become of him, that Bahrok carried his necklace?

General Nathaniel ruffled his brow. "You're certain it was he? I was told Montenegro fell at the Battle of Buccaneer's Den, to Brother Rictor's poison, no less. My spies watched his surviving cousin and reported no evidence to the contrary."

"It was Montenegro," growled the Juka. "I could never mistake that demonic face. I do not know how he survived Braun's Needle, but he ambushed me outside my encamp-

ment yesterday morning, thirsty for my blood. We executed a proper duel. I won back the honor of my son, whom he murdered three years ago. That, at least, is satisfying."

Raveka listened with stunned dispassion. She did not know how to react, except to evade the anguish that tightened her stomach. She dared not chant in her head, for fear of missing details.

Bahrok continued, "But he escaped the killing blow and he is still out there." Relief tingled through Raveka's body. She exerted a conscious effort not to relax too quickly, lest Shavade detect her presence. The warlord added, "We all know how dangerous he is. General Nathaniel, I hold you responsible for his involvement in our affairs. And Lector Sartorius, are you aware that Montenegro now wears the black of a Technocrat? He is the deadly warrior they call 'Cavalier.'"

The Theorist steepled his fingers. "In the service of Lector Gaff. Of course. It fits the evidence."

Nathaniel responded with waxing displeasure. "And what do you imagine I must do to 'atone' for this, Warlord?"

"I want your blood," grinned Bahrok.

Kavah rose from his chair and interrupted, "Gentlemen, please! Bahrok, we shall have time to address your grievance later. First let us make a full disclosure of where our designs now stand. This fleet is three days from the coast. Warlord, are you prepared to secure the landing?"

"As long as it lands where we agreed, and not where Clan Kumar thinks it will."

"Excellent. Lector Sartorius, what is the status of your army?"

"We are recalling the majority of our forces to defend the capital. The east will soon belong to Garron. Lector Gaff has

seized the war machines underneath Junction but I am not sure he will be capable of repairing them. If he does, I have troops in place to storm the facility before the invasion force arrives. Junction will fall without significant contest."

"Good. General, your troops will be ready to march immediately?"

"Indeed we shall. Sartorius, I hope the intelligence that you give us will have improved by the time we arrive in Junction, but it doesn't matter in the end. We'll force Blackthorn out of power for you. Rely upon that."

Raveka grimaced. She had heard enough. With a slow, steady motion she reached a hand to her belt and inside a long, black bag.

"Excellent," said Kavah, "then our only setback is that Bahrok's army is more scattered than we had hoped. I believe we shall recover from that. We can move on to our immediate plans. Lector, explain your next move."

The Technocrat gazed at Nathaniel. "A force of airships will attack your fleet as you come ashore. I was unable to prevent this action without jeopardizing the confidence of my generals. I have eliminated any ground-based support, but you must be prepared to take some casualties. I suggest you decide which of your vessels you are prepared to sacrifice."

From the bag at her waist, Raveka withdrew a slender bolt thrower. With careful patience she turned the handle that cocked the spring into place. Scrupulously maintained, the weapon made no sound. Then she pulled out a small vial and two needle-shaped darts. She dipped the points into the vial. They glistened with venom. She eased one of the poison darts into the bolt thrower.

Above, the general frowned bitterly at the Technocrat's

suggestion. "I knew it would come to this. It's distasteful, but such is warfare. I have just the rabble in mind for you to strike. We're abiding ten privateer ships, led by the *Menagerie*, that Admiral Duarte insisted we bring along. They're crewed by pirates and thieves who imagine they've been forgiven for their crimes. Sink them at your leisure. I shall not mourn them."

Sartorius nodded. "Command them to secure the southern limit of the fleet. We shall attack from there."

"They'll be in position, and unsuspecting. Show no mercy to those cutthroats."

"Technocrats are rarely merciful, General."

Raveka gauged the angles from which she could fire her weapon. She calculated a suitable trajectory to hit each person in Nathaniel's cabin. All that remained was to choose her targets. Kavah would have to die first, of course, lest his magic revive any others. Then she would have time for one more shot before the survivors fled or killed her. The death of any member of the Pact of Four would serve the defense of Logosia, but one of them must pose the greatest threat. She worked through the permutations to decide who must die.

Chamberlain Kavah remained on his feet. He gestured as he spoke, the idiom of a statesman. "Very well. Let us proceed. There is more news from Logos, which I shall deliver myself. At my behest Lector Sartorius has made a prisoner of Dame Adhayah, the ambassador from Ishpur. This will ensure that she does not interfere with the attack on the city."

Raveka pinched her brow. Her mind raced through political calculations. Why take the Meer ambassador as a prisoner?

The general nearly choked. "Are you mad? That's an act of war! What do we gain from it? We don't need the Ishpurian army to help us with the invasion. And perhaps you know your own people better than I do, but I have a difficult time believing that a Matriarch would meddle in a full-scale battle. Not even one that's going on around her."

Bahrok let out a growl. "Indeed, Chamberlain. What are you up to? Now that we know who you are, it is time you explained your stake in this war. I like to know a man's motives before I trust him with my well-being."

"He has been elusive with his intentions," commented Sartorius, "and such behavior grows inappropriate."

"Gentlemen," said Kavah, "there's no cause for suspicion. I've served Dame Adhayah for many years. I tell you there's a danger that she might interfere."

Bahrok crossed his massive arms. "You did not answer the question, sorcerer, and our patience is thinner by the second."

At the side of the room, Shavade shifted her weight and smiled at the Juka.

Kavah clasped his hands together. "Very well. You're correct, of course. I shall explain." He braced his fingertips on the table. "Why take the Matriarch hostage? Because she might learn what I have planned. She would certainly move to stop me. You're right, I do have a concrete motive in this war. There's something in Logos that is very valuable to me and I intend to take it when the city is attacked."

Sartorius scowled. "Elaborate at once."

"It's something you cannot give to me, Your Excellency, because it's not within your reach. It is a place of magical power in the city. A rift in the Ether, to be specific, though I don't expect you to understand what that means."

"Where is this place?" asked the Technocrat.

"The Techno-Prophet's tower," said the Meer, "in the keep of Blackthorn himself. As you are well aware, His Eminence never leaves that building. And I am not strong enough to challenge him directly."

Bahrok stroked his chin. "You organized an invasion to distract Blackthorn long enough to get inside his tower? By the crows of Garron, our ally is nothing more than a burglar! Great Mother help us all."

"No," said General Nathaniel, "it has to be bigger than that. What kind of power are you talking about, Kavah? What will you do with it?"

"The rift will grant me a direct source of mana from the very Ether itself. With it I'll be able to strike down the theocracy of the Matriarchs and restore the ancient dignity of the Firstborn Mystics." He patted his chest. "Until this century, my kind were the equals of Matriarchs. Our society was balanced between the masculine and the feminine. But the Matriarchs took advantage of the Cataclysm to outlaw our Lore Council. We've never had the power to take back our birthright, until now."

Raveka blinked. So it was a political move for Kavah's benefit. The issue was not immediately relevant. She refocused her thoughts on the decision at hand.

Lector Sartorius said, "Perhaps it is possible to direct the ambassador's wrath at Blackthorn himself. Pikas and I have secured her in the tunnels underneath Junction. She is cut off from outside contact. We can fabricate information that implicates the Techno-Prophet. A Matriarch would be a powerful contributor to Blackthorn's demise."

And Raveka made up her mind. Sartorius plotted too big. He had to die now, while she had this remarkable chance. She gauged the optimal path between the bolt thrower and

Chamberlain Kavah. One quick shot would fell the sorcerer. She would reload and fire the second dart before Sartorius could clear his chair. After that Warlord Bahrok would probably vanish using his crystal teleporting rod. General Nathaniel and Shavade, however, would certainly pursue her. She could leap out the window and swim away, but she doubted she could evade them for long. Nathaniel would set magicians of Water Magic on her trail. If she stayed among the fleet she would be found. She knew she could not swim all the way to the coast.

Her death would come soon, then. The thought chilled her, but her body coursed with energy. A mathematical chant steadied her nerves. Then she aimed the bolt thrower and thought, *Good-bye, Gabriel. Perhaps I'll see you soon.*

She stopped her finger from throwing the switch.

She pursed her lips and realized that she dared not die. The information she carried was too important. She knew the logistics of the New Britannian army and just as importantly, the plans of the Pact of Four. She knew where the Meer ambassador was being held. She might learn more yet.

Killing Sartorius would not stop the invasion. Presenting her knowledge to Lector Gaff could save thousands of lives.

She closed her eyes and stifled a curse. Then she removed the poison dart and slid the weapon into the bag again.

"I shall help you with your civil war, then, Kavah," said Bahrok, "and you can help me with mine. It is my turn to speak now. Gentlemen, the four of us hold history in our hands. We must share in the difficult decisions. Tomorrow a change occurs in Jukaran and all of you must do your part. General, if you want to know what I require of you, it is literally a drop of your blood." The warlord whisked out a long dagger and stabbed it into the tabletop. "My people

have a ceremony known as Sanguination. Before embarking upon a journey or battle, warriors sacrifice their blood to the Great Mother in return for her blessing."

Sartorius muttered, "Perhaps you might get to the point."

"It was Montenegro's attack that finally decided me. There is beauty in direct action. Shirron Turlogan of Garron will die tonight. We shall send Pikas to do the job. He shall wear this pendant to place suspicion on Montenegro. When the news reaches Clan Varang I shall declare myself Shirron of the Juka Clans and have authority over the people of Jukaran."

Kavah said, "And you want us to participate in this Sanguination to share the blame among us."

"Do not balk at the responsibility. We are shaping nations."

General Nathaniel snapped, "But we are not assassins! I agreed to eliminate Blackthorn with honorable warfare. Pikas is a vicious dog. The Virtues do not allow cutting throats in the dark of night!"

"The Virtues! General, perhaps it is not clear to you, who have been so isolated from the conflict, but this war goes beyond the rules of any one society. Sartorius betrays the Machine because he refuses to serve a madman. Kavah rises against the Matriarchs to correct an injustice. I myself am loath to condone assassination, yet I am doing just that to unify my people. And so must your Virtues stand aside for the good of four nations. Nathaniel, we agreed to this pact with the understanding that each of us possesses the courage to make it work. Show us your courage now."

Sartorius added, "He is correct, General. I am sacrificing tremendous resources in this affair. Surely you would not demean that loss with naive trepidation."

"I must concur," nodded Kavah.

Nathaniel entwined his fingers and stared at them grimly. Then he thrust out his hand and snatched the knife from the table. Pulling back his sleeve, he touched the blade to his forearm. "Let Valor and Sacrifice stand where Honor fails." With a quick stroke he slit open his arm. A stream of blood poured onto the teakwood table.

Bahrok grinned. "Great Mother, bless us with victory." He took the knife and cut himself, spilling his blood atop Nathaniel's.

"May our ancestors grant us fortitude," said Kavah as he added to the crimson pool.

"The Machine is the universe," grumbled Sartorius, then squeezed his bleeding arm. "I do not approve of wanton magic, yet I insist that you heal me now, Chamberlain. I approve of this barbaric ritual even less."

Warlord Bahrok laughed. "It is not a sacrifice if you heal it, Technocrat! But do as you will. Turlogan's blood will be on all of our hands now."

Chamberlain Kavah smiled and rubbed his hands together. "Excellent. This is a pivotal moment, gentlemen. The destiny of Sosaria turns around this room. I propose that we toast the moment. General Nathaniel, I presume you have something to drink here? You look as though you could use it."

The general's expression was black. He pointed to a cabinet across the room. At Kavah's gesture Shavade opened it and began to pour brandy into the first of four glasses.

Raveka held her breath. The Huntress had selected the bottle that Lady Aria had given to Nathaniel and Gideon. The brandy contained the deadliest poison in Logos.

But Nathaniel waved his hand. "Not that one! It has a special purpose. Take the bottle beside it."

Shavade shrugged and complied. Raveka winced with disappointment. When the Pact of Four toasted their schemes, Shavade raised to her own lips the one glass that contained a splash of poisoned liquor.

Her ears flattened before she drank. She sniffed the brandy. Then she glanced at Nathaniel and giggled.

On his bed, Lord Gideon coughed and began to stir. In a flash Raveka slipped behind the desk for cover. The nobleman stopped snoring, but he did not rise. The Mathematician sighed with relief. She strained her ears but heard no more voices in the cabin above. A series of bright flashes blinked through the spy hole, the signature of the Pact's teleportation crystals. The meeting, it seemed, had run its course.

When Gideon resumed his snoring, Raveka massaged her eyes and pondered this unexpected gift of knowledge. She did not care about the assassination of the Shirron, of course. Turlogan was the enemy of Logos. She was more concerned with Kavah's agenda in Avenosh. The kidnapping of Ambassador Adhayah could bring more unwanted military attention to Logosia. She would have to inform Lector Gaff of the danger. But most of all she feared the coordination between parties on both sides of the invasion. Sartorius, Bahrok and Nathaniel could architect the bloodiest results from this war. It was almost an explicit part of their plan.

But Gaff had instructed her how to fight back. Fundamentally a system was only as organized as its components. Dissension could lever them apart. She had already planted the seeds while she was in Britain. From the desk she retrieved a quill and a sheet of paper, upon which she wrote, *Nathaniel is responsible for the fate of Turlogan. Ask him about the stain on his table.* For credibility she added, *He will punish*

the privateers. Then she dried the note with a quiet breath and folded it. As she slipped it under Lord Gideon's pillow, she kissed the drugged man's brow. "Rescue me, noble knight," she whispered, then crept out of the cabin as it swayed with the ocean waves. She still had much to accomplish tonight. The war was only beginning.

11

INTRUDERS

Clinging jungle vegetation gave way to a broad, golden savanna. The stagnant odor of the swamp relented to a fresh breeze. Painted in brown shades of muck, Jatha and Fairfax stood at the boundary of the two regions and gazed into the distance. On the southern horizon was a tiny spot that glittered in the afternoon sun.

Jatha smiled broadly at the distant sight of Ishpur, the city of crystal that was his childhood home. "I told you it was beautiful, didn't I? The twinkle in the eye of Sosaria."

Fairfax seemed less impressed. At the end of a great task, he had begun to lament its difficulty. "Three weeks. It took us three weeks to get here. We could cross the breadth of New Britannia in that time! Did all my skills drown in that vile cess pit?"

"Cork your despair, you yeti cub. I told you this jungle is sometimes called Deceit. There's magic inside that confuses directions. Not even the Meer travel it lightly. No doubt that's why Kavah and his accomplices chose it for a lair."

"I shall return to this swamp someday and conquer it. By the Virtues, I have my pride."

"Don't lie. You wouldn't go back in there for all the wine in Trinsic. Neither would I."

He rolled his eyes and grumbled, "Maybe not, but I'll curse it to the end of my days. But look, we've reached civilization at last. You promised you'd explain to me all those titles you hold. I don't wish to compromise your privacy, but it will probably have some bearing on our status and comfort when we enter the city."

"I suppose you have earned some modicum of kindness. Very well, my full name is Jatha Sayarukan, Firstborn of Hidasah and Secular Heir to the House of Ramishpur. Sayarukan is my family name, you see. I am the oldest son of Hidasah, who is the great-granddaughter of Dame Sayaru, the most revered of the living Matriarchs. The House of Ramishpur consists of the families of my mother and her sisters."

"What's a 'Secular Heir'?"

"As the firstborn son of the eldest sister, I am the ranking male member of the household. That means I inherited all of its secular responsibilities. That is to say, the administrative chores. I was to become the supreme clerk of my family. Do you wonder why I left for more libertine enterprises? Yet if I were a woman I would have been in line to become a Matriarch myself. Fate works with unexpected tools, my friend. But for a trick of plumbing, I could have governed Avenosh."

"I knew your family was wealthy, but I did not know you were exalted! I'd be humbled if I didn't know you for a degenerate sot." When Jatha dignified no response, the ranger slapped him on the back. "Thank your ancestors that you're not a woman. I couldn't bear to see you lose what little sense and integrity you manage to retain. Besides, gov-

ernment is nothing but a jewel-infested prison. Who would want to rule a kingdom at the expense of liberty and base gratification?"

The wizard blew a wistful sigh. "I wanted to, before I left Ishpur."

"You're joking."

Jatha chuckled. "There was a time when I was headstrong and idealistic. Yes, I know that's not an easy image to conjure, but as a youth I was seduced by the glory of my titles. I wanted to fulfill some grand, undefined destiny. But these are spare times for a Firstborn. Before the Cataclysm I could have joined the Lore Council and participated in Ishpurian government, but when Adranath brought the Cataclysm upon the world, the Matriarchs disbanded the council and assumed full control of the government. And so Firstborn sons like me are obliged to become very esteemed household clerks. It was not the glorious fate my porridge-brain had envisioned."

Fairfax grinned. "So you concocted some idiotic scheme to rectify the injustice?"

"Not a scheme so much as an ultimatum. I informed Dame Sayaru that the time had come to return men to their place in government. I demanded to stand among the female leaders of the Mystic caste."

"You wanted to become a Matriarch? Ha! And I thought my ego was a juggernaut."

He shrugged. "The notion seemed reasonable at the time. I guess I would have called myself a Patriarch. Not that the title was ever debated, of course. They chased me off like a fox from a huntsman's yard. I bellowed my indignation to the ancestors and then sailed for New Britannia to escape my embarrassment. That's when I met you and my destiny was forever corrupted."

"You owe me for that, too. What a disaster you would have been without my artful guidance. Well, your family sends you a stipend, so I assume you're not a pariah. I have a chafing suspicion, though, that our welcome will not be without controversy. Should I be worried?"

"Worried? What is there to worry about? Those days are forgotten history."

"Don't kid me, Jatha. The Meer don't forget anything. That's the only reason you can call your society 'ancient.' But I'll partake of your confidence, despite my instincts to the contrary. And so, my friend, where your family is concerned I have just one further question to present."

"I hesitate to ask."

"When will you introduce me to your sisters?"

"I have no sisters, Fairfax."

"Now who is the liar? You once told me you have ten of them!"

"That was before your boots touched Avenosh soil. As of now, consider me an only child."

"What kind of gratitude is that?"

"You assume I'm protecting them from you and not the reverse."

"Sorry, you're only intriguing me."

Jatha smirked. "Forget it, you bearded troll. Mystic women are not like Shavade. They're chaste and dignified. Out of your depth."

"If I drown then I drown, my hirsute friend, but at least I'll be submerged in beauty. That is my own notion of a glorious destiny."

With a laugh they started across the wide savanna. Jatha leaned on a walking staff even though his strength had mostly returned. In a flood of energy his companion darted

across the open field, slashing a furrow through the amber grass. His howl of freedom startled winged creatures to flight.

When the armies of New Britannia arrived at Logosia, the production was a marvel to behold. A hundred tall ships anchored some distance from the rocky shore. Their sails were furled to reveal a spiny landscape of masts and pulleys and bowsprits. In the drizzle of a wet morning their lanterns shone like yellow gemstones. Proceeding from the midst of the fleet was a tide of smaller landing boats, each driven shoreward by many pairs of oars. Like a plague of insects did the boats crawl to land in a slow, inexorable swarm. Each boat carried at its prow a spellcaster whose magic ignited a lavender globe of light. When the boats landed, soldiers in leather armor disembarked, collected their long weapons and formed into neat platoons at the commands of their officers. As more troops arrived they marched farther up the pebbled beach. Soon the shoreline was brimming with ranks upon ranks of soldiers, measured by glowing points of magic.

A few hundred yards inland, the length of the shore was walled by rough, grey crags. The harsh mountains stood watch like giant sentinels against the barbarian sea. The range extended to both horizons. Scattered across the slopes and crowding the open beach to the north was a vast horde of Jukan warriors staring in amazement. The army of Clan Varang was mighty to behold. In troops it seemed limitless, though the New Britannian forces arrived in such a swell that by dusk they would outnumber the Juka by a third.

The mood of the scene was somber, darkly expectant, as

if the Logosian mountains themselves might lift up their foothills and squash both armies of invaders.

But so far no threats had materialized. Raveka kept her eyes to the south, though, in case the low, roiling clouds hid an ambush. The wooden Britannian ships looked fragile atop the steely sea.

The Mathematician sat in a boat with thirty soldiers and pulled on a stout, soggy oar. She was dressed in a hauberk of studded leather like the rest of the infantry. Naturally, penetrating the army had required trivial effort. With nearly ten thousand troops deployed, every soldier worked beside a stranger. While still in Britain she had contrived a false identity and insinuated herself into a platoon of spearmen. Or perhaps spearwomen was the better term, for her troop-mates were entirely female. They had accepted her at once when she demonstrated her brass. The company had been pleasant on the journey across the sea and had never suspected her nocturnal forays. Raveka would almost be sad to leave them.

But of course they were enemies and she had to detach herself. This landing would be the last she saw of them. So she ignored their chatter as she spied the southern clouds, wondering when Sartorius would strike.

"Sian's infatuated," commented one armored woman, using Raveka's false name. "She can't stop looking at those privateer barks."

"Can't be," said another. "She's too pretty to mix with that load of vagabonds. Sian, listen to me, you should find yourself a rich knight and let him pamper you. You're fair as any lady I ever saw and twice the man of any soldier."

"Nah, look at her. She's smitten. There's rogues in her

eyes. You can see it in her face. She wants one of those dangerous lovers."

"I ran with a sailor once. They ain't so tough. More salty than hardy, if you get me."

The women all laughed except for Raveka, who jutted up a stern finger. "Listen!"

The platoon fell silent. The restless ocean sloshed against the boat. Oars creaked in their mounts. Puddles rippled under their feet, amplified by the round, wooden hull.

Something bumped the bottom of the boat. They were still in deep water, a hundred yards from shore.

Then the entire craft lurched upward with a great splash. The women cried out as they scattered through the air. Raveka clung to her oar and tried to glimpse what had upended them. In the frothy tumble of seawater she discerned a large, steely shape with mechanical claws. It was a clockwork leviathan, a marine cousin of the juggernaut. This was not the attack she had expected.

She hit the water hard and kicked away from the capsized boat. The leviathan began to tear the hull to pieces with devastating ease. The automaton was the size of a New Britannian carriage and riveted with thick, metal armor. Its crablike claws were larger than saddles, snapping through wooden planks like scissors. In seconds the boat was flotsam. Soldiers swam away from the monster and it pursued them by churning broad, submerged propellers. The women it caught proved as fragile as the boat. Now others turned against the leviathan and laid into it with swords and spears. The clangs of metal on metal filled the misty air, alongside the screams of human warriors and a constant, frantic splashing.

All around Raveka the sea boiled with blood as two or three dozen of the automatons surfaced. Then the wizards

launched counterattacks of fire and roaring whirlpools. Great winds swept down from the sky. Leviathans tossed through the air, smoking and flailing, and crashed against the rocky beach. More than a thousand soldiers had already landed and they stormed the mechanical beings with a torrent of crashing blows. The troops of Clan Varang closed in to help.

Raveka swam for shore through the thick, grisly seawater. She fought down a panic as her legs kicked opaque water. When her feet discovered the bottom she scrambled onto the rocks, assisted by other infantrymen. Scores of other swimmers arrived with her. She draped on a flat rock and turned around to survey the battle.

The leviathan attack was over. Perhaps fifteen of the steel creatures were dismantled. The others must have fled. She estimated a hundred or more casualties, though the healers were already illuminating the distant waves with their spells. The final tally of dead would be lower than a conventional army. Such was the strength of the New Britannian military, permeated with sorcery.

Then she heard a series of dull popping sounds. She looked south. The ambush had begun on the privateer ships. In the distance she saw blooms of fire, penstrokes of lightning, followed by unsynchronized booms. She shook the seawater from her close-cropped hair and dashed down the beach for a closer look. A host of other soldiers followed. As she closed on the battle she picked out airships hovering in the low, angry clouds. They seemed to be clustering over two or three privateer warships. The vessels fought back with sorcery and flaming missiles but their hulls had already begun to burn. One of the ships, she saw, bore the name *Menagerie* on its prow.

Abruptly an airship listed in the sky. Slowly the floating vessel descended toward the ocean. Raveka saw chains attached to its hull. Great winches on the *Menagerie* dragged the airship from its high position of safety. Privateers thronged the barquentine's riggings, ready to board. The airship vomited great clouds of fire. Sailors screamed and dove for safety. Spells glittered across the *Menagerie* to extinguish the rising flames.

Raveka watched in amazement as Captain Bawdewyn reeled the airship to the level of the mainmast. A stream of sailors leapt aboard the Technocrat vessel waving spears and cutlasses. She knew the airship was lost then. These bombardment craft were manned by engineers, not fighters, and the bloodthirsty sailors outnumbered them five to one. In minutes the airship descended to the water's surface. The privateers let out a hearty cheer as the waves swallowed the black, smoking vessel.

More lightning streaked from the sky. The *Menagerie* shook with the impact. One of its masts split and toppled. Raveka spotted a second wave of airships descending from the concealing clouds, doubling the number in the assault. She saw Bawdewyn's men preparing to fire another volley of boarding chains, but it was clear they could not haul down the airships fast enough. Another privateer vessel had started to blaze.

With excitement she clutched her hands to her chest. Though the privateers were not part of the New Britannian ground force, every Technocrat victory now was a boost to her spirit. Her emotions were rampant. She chanted a geometric proof to calm her twisted nerves, but abandoned it on the first verse. The drama on the water shackled her attention.

A dazzling cascade erupted from the sea. In the middle of Bawdewyn's flotilla appeared a huge, resplendent galleon. She recognized the *Akalabeth*, the warship of the House of the Griffin. The archmages must have lain in wait for the full brace of airships to appear. A glimmering, translucent sphere enclosed the huge craft and repelled the lightning and fire that streaked from above. Wailing funnel clouds snaked from the deck and swatted aside airships like toys. The flying vessels tumbled to the mountainside at achingly slow speeds. Their impacts were gradual and devastating.

Then the ocean itself emitted a groan. The rumbling noise hushed the land-bound audience. As the battle raged the privateer warships began to toss and roll fiercely. The waterline receded many yards from the beach. Then gigantic columns of seawater thrust underneath the privateers, hoisting the ships into the air. Plumes of white spray pounded the hulls like drums. Raveka gaped. This was unprecedented sorcery. She watched as each privateer vessel soared on a pillar of water to a position beside an airship. The *Menagerie* and her sisters disgorged howling warriors who overwhelmed the Technocrat engineers. The archmages on board the *Akalabeth* moved the privateers like kites among the airships, which succumbed to ruthless, unstoppable boarding attacks. Slowly, silently, the beaten Technocrat vessels descended from the clouds. The turbulent sea gulped each in turn. When the privateer warships touched gently to the ocean's surface, a titanic cheer exploded from the army.

But Sister Raveka fought a sickness in her belly. She hurried away from the waterfront and darted behind the boulders of the foothills. She doubled over and gasped for

breath. Finally she droned a mathematical chant, softly but aloud.

Of course this was the result of her note to Lord Gideon. She had mentioned the privateers so that, after this attack occurred, he would be convinced that her accusation of General Nathaniel was genuine. But Gideon must have deduced that an attack was imminent. He had alerted the archmages. With astounding efficiency they had organized a response. She could never have anticipated such a crushing defeat. The thought of it weakened her physically.

After a few minutes she leaned her head back against the rock wall. She repeated the chant in her mind and the weakness of her body incrementally faded. Then she rubbed her tired face. Lector Gaff had been correct. She had become too emotional in her affinity for New Britannia. It had made her impulsive and prone to mistakes. The stakes were too high for that. To be an effective spy she would need to ground herself again in the strictures of the Machine. To do so she must travel to Logos. While she was there she would also deliver the vital information that she carried.

And in Junction, in Logos's shadow, she would return to Gabriel's arms, which no verse or litany could entice her to forget.

At least today's events indicated that Gideon had received her message. Whether he would investigate General Nathaniel she could not say, but the nobleman was charmingly idealistic and faithful to the Virtues. The odds were not hopeless that he might foil the general's schemes.

But she had already fired that particular arrow. Now she must press onward. After a deep breath she headed up the mountain slope to a hidden place among the crags. She had swum ashore last night and stashed her clothes and equip-

ment there. She would collect them, steal a ridgeback and set off to the southeast. The steam of Logos called to her and she intended to breathe it soon.

The crystal audience chamber of the venerable Dame Sayaru was at once austere and luxurious. In the manner of Matriarchs the very old Meer honored elegant, organic rules of design. The room had a high ceiling with simple arches, supported by pillars that evoked asymmetric crystalline shapes. Very little adornment cluttered the open spaces—pots of smoldering herbs to scent the spicy air, a broad, soft rug underfoot, long veils draped from above to grant privacy to the Matriarch's glittering throne. Yet the walls were fashioned of magnificent crystal in the colors of sapphire and emerald. A gentle glow issued from within, softly illuminating the chamber. The rug and veils were woven using techniques honed by millennia, their textures and reflective qualities exquisitely cultured. Even the play of sound in the open spaces revealed deliberate, skillful refinement.

Jatha breathed deep the stately ambience of the room. A feeling of reverence swept through him. Here was the footprint of his ancient culture, the physical manifestation of thousands of years of civilization. The spirits of the ancestors guided them. Calm, dignified, natural, magical; these traits pervaded Meer society and were exemplified in the Mystic caste. His return to Ishpur had fanned the embers of his cultural pride.

Yet old resentments had flared inside him as well. As he knelt now before his exalted great-great grandmother, the ancient Matriarch Sayaru, he stifled the disenfranchised feeling that had driven him from Avenosh a decade earlier.

Instead he respectfully explained the events that had brought him back.

The aged Matriarch listened with attentive reserve. She was a proud figure on her angular crystal throne. Gem-studded silk swathed her gaunt frame. A draped headdress fell across her shoulders. Her fur was marbled grey, painstakingly washed and oiled to grant her a nearly glasslike sheen. Her voice was rich and high. "You say Chamberlain Kavah has captured the nexus point in New Britannia?"

The wizard nodded from the pillow where he knelt. "Yes, Venerable Grandmother, he has secured it. The humans call the phenomenon a 'beacon.' I've never seen such power before."

The old woman narrowed her severe eyes. "I have. It is the result of the ghastliest violence to the Ether. The Lore Council once wielded it. I fear Kavah's desire is to resurrect that cursed circle. His cabal of Firstborn sons in Deceit are laying the groundwork for their abomination. And as yet, I fear, we have been unable to stop them. The Warrior caste cannot track them in that jungle. The Firstborns shield themselves from our dreams. Their power is already great, for they control a second nexus point in their lair."

"Fairfax and I were there. We saw no second beacon in that old Terathan cave."

"It is there. It is the source of the enchantment that makes the swamp impassable. You are lucky to have emerged from the heart of that foul place. Your human companion is to be commended."

Jatha dared a grin. "Please don't tell him that, Grandmother. He thinks too much of himself already."

The Matriarch scowled. "These are not flippant affairs, Jatha!"

He dropped his gaze to the floor. He quelled his irritation. "Forgive me, Grandmother."

"Are you aware of the nature of a nexus point?"

"I understand they are rifts in the Ether."

"They are indeed, but that does no justice to the danger they pose. They are remnants of the Cataclysm itself."

He perked his ears. "Interesting. The human archmages know nothing of this, that I am aware of."

"Nor should they. Some knowledge is too dangerous. It tempts weak minds, as it has done with Kavah. So we feign ignorance of these matters. You must use discretion, Jatha, before you tell this to anyone. Swear to it."

He blinked slowly. "I swear, Grandmother."

"You are aware that every culture tells its own story of the Cataclysm. The New Britannians claim that Blackthorn and the Lost King unleashed it in a great battle. The Juka insist that the Overlords created it with a thunderous machine, to quell the slave revolt. And, of course, we know that our Lore Council attempted to reshape the world with disastrous consequences. But the fact is, these three separate events joined our worlds together in the fusion that was the Cataclysm."

"Fusion? I thought the Cataclysm tore the world apart."

"I can remember the days when the Meer were all that were. No other civilized races shared our lands. The humans and Juka did not exist. In those times the three races dwelt in different worlds, Jatha. Different Sosarias. But each of those worlds destroyed itself with the folly of great power. Each universe met its end. We stand today upon a patchwork, a mosaic of what remained. Fragments of our sundered lands came together in the Ether, like leaves in a pond. The Cataclysm destroyed three worlds and created a fourth one. It was a convergence."

Jatha nodded. "I see. And the nexus points are weaknesses in the seams."

"It is a reasonable metaphor. We know of two such points, one in New Britannia and one in the pits of Deceit. We conjecture that a third exists somewhere in Logosia, near the place where the Overlords built their terrible machine."

"If I recall my Jukan history, that would be Logos itself, which was once called Citadel Moonglow."

"Perhaps. We do not know precisely where it is, though we fear that Kavah has located it. We fear too that he has perpetrated this so-called 'Pact of Four' as a scheme to capture it. If he does so, his power will become unthinkable."

"I have seen what one nexus point can do. Three would be daunting."

Sayaru raised a hand for emphasis. "The three are more dangerous than their sum. Our world is composed of three great continents, three great fragments. If he controls a nexus point in all of them, he holds the breadth of Sosaria in his power."

"I don't understand, Grandmother."

"Imagine a clay pot with three cracks. Drive a wedge into one crack and water will leak out. Drive a wedge into all three cracks and the pot will fall to pieces. That is the power Kavah seeks to possess."

Jatha flattened his ears. "You mean he could cause another Cataclysm?"

"Which would rip the world asunder once more. The fragments would remain, but in what form no one can say. It is certain, however, that societies and governments will be thrown into chaos. We fear Kavah intends to use this power

to strike down the Matriarchs and establish the rule of a new Lore Council."

"That's unthinkable!"

The Matriarch lifted her chin. Her old eyes watched him closely. "You are not unacquainted, Jatha, with the resentment that drives him."

Old grudges stirred inside his chest. This time he could not conceal it from his face. "Venerable Grandmother, understand me when I say that I gravely disapprove of such a comparison."

Her stare literally flashed. "Keep your tongue, Jatha! You are no pride to your house and family. You are a dissolute man." Then she deigned to add, with a sigh, "But at least I can say that you are not evil."

She had deliberately provoked him to justify her own response. It was the guile of a pacifist. He subdued his pique and spoke in a low, measured tone. "Thank you, Grandmother." Then he added, "Kavah flirts with the ultimate evil, to use Cataclysm as a weapon."

"May the ancestors guide us to salvation. Three worlds are tossed together and the result is a maelstrom. Our universe, I fear, is a sinking ship."

He saw troubled thoughts behind Sayaru's austere mask. He had never imagined that she would be afraid of anything. But Kavah's treachery posed the first real challenge to the Matriarchs since the Cataclysm itself. He wondered how they would respond. Their collective power was as great as any in Sosaria but they were stubbornly passive when conflicts arose.

Jatha, however, knew the value of action. He was determined to rouse them to address the danger. If a threat appeared in a distant land then the Matriarchs must strike it

down. Whether he could convince them of the necessity was a daunting question. Taking another deep breath, he began to pursue the answer.

The western shore of Logosia swarmed with New Britannian troops. By nightfall the bulk of the infantry had landed, albeit with no small amount of worry. But no further attacks came. Tents and torches and campfires sprang up by the thousands. The fleet of stolid warships observed the deployment quietly, their hundred golden lanterns impaling the ocean with serrated reflections. The boats that rowed back and forth mostly shuttled cargo and livestock now. Wagons were already assembled and loaded, preparing for the march inland.

Inside a large tent at the center of the encampment, two men converged upon a small, wooden crate. General Nathaniel opened the lid and retrieved a bottle of brandy and two glasses, which he began to fill. "There you are. Hale and intact, as I promised." He handed a glass to Lord Gideon, who accepted it absently. The nobleman's face was marked with unease.

"It does not make sense, Nathaniel. Clan Kumar was supposed to meet us, not Clan Varang. We should have been dealing with the legitimate government of Garron."

The general shrugged. "Perhaps someone told Kumar the wrong landing point. You know these Juka. They plot against one other as casually as you or I might throw a summer party."

Gideon glanced at the officer. "That's exactly my fear."

"Don't trouble yourself over it. The internal politics of the Juka Clans are not our problem, as long as they're united against Blackthorn. I'm interested in their strength, not their honor." He lifted his brandy glass. "Look here, the time has

come to toast our exquisite ladies, as we promised them in Britain. Here's to Aria and Annabel, whose beauty and loyalty shine all the way across the ocean. May they always be custodians of our souls." When Gideon gave no answer, the general frowned. "What's wrong? I thought you were anticipating this moment."

The nobleman set down his glass with a conspicuous *thump*. "I was. I am. But I must ask you a question first."

Nathaniel tilted his head. Long braids whispered over his breastplate. "I'm listening."

"Shirron Turlogan is dead. Warlord Bahrok has declared himself the successor to the throne."

"I know. Of course the murder is shocking, but this is a war. No one accuses Blackthorn of honor."

Gideon stared at the general. "Nathaniel, what role did you play in his death?"

"What's that? I don't understand."

"You heard my question."

Nathaniel lifted his chin. His face hardened. "What are you implying, Gideon?"

"Just this: I want you to look me in the eye and deny that you had a hand in Turlogan's assassination."

The general slammed down his brandy on the wooden crate. "That's outrageous!"

"I know you for an honest man. I shall take your word as truth, but you must give it to me explicitly."

"Who told you this slander?"

"It doesn't matter. Nathaniel, your reticence is an implication itself."

The older man threw up his hands in shock. "Reticence! Insult, you mean! I can't believe you would suspect me of such a crime."

"Then explain to me the bloodstain on the table in your cabin." Gideon watched the general's eyes dart away for an instant. But the officer said nothing and Gideon continued, "I saw it before we came ashore. It has some meaning. I want to know what."

The general paused to rub the bridge of his nose. "Gideon, I beg you. Don't pry into my secret dealings. I make many allies while gathering my intelligence. Not all of them are savory people."

"I don't expect your allies to be honorable, but I do expect you to adhere to the Virtues. You're a knight, Nathaniel, in the order I command."

"And your order," growled Nathaniel, "serves my army. Don't throw your rank at me. We're in a military action now. I shall do what I deem appropriate to secure our victory. I won't brook dissension, even from the lord of the House of the Lion."

"Won't you? Then settle the issue now. Tell me you had no part in Turlogan's assassination. Tell me it wasn't a plot between yourself and Warlord Bahrok to put that great boor on the Jukan throne." The general seemed to be weighing an answer, which was response enough for Lord Gideon. The nobleman moved toward the door of the tent. "Very well. I shall not drink with you."

"Montenegro's paranoia has infected you, as well."

Gideon stopped. He spoke with subdued ire. "Ever since Sir Gabriel presented his case to me, I have watched you for personal reasons. I now know I should have listened to him with more of an open mind. He was imperfect but he lived and died with a devotion to Honor. If we are diligent, you and I, perhaps the same can be said of us."

Nathaniel muttered, "It is not Honor you appease. It is Montenegro's cousin. She's got into your head."

The nobleman glowered, "Speak of her again and I shall draw my sword, Nathaniel. Is that clear?" Then he turned away and headed for the exit.

"Where are you going?"

"To collect my knights, if you please. I understand Clan Kumar is camped several miles north of here. The Silver Serpents shall ride to Logos alongside Warlord Venduss. I want no part of this criminal alliance between you and Warlord Bahrok."

"You can't do that!"

"Watch and see if I can, Nathaniel. Don't bother to saddle up. You are not welcome among us."

General Nathaniel pointed a finger and stalked after the nobleman. "This is insubordination! You'll be disgraced in the House of the Lion!"

"Why do you protest? Your design is now complete, isn't it? That's what this invasion means to you. A chance to take the Lion from me. You conniving toad! Tell me, am I next after Turlogan? Will I wake some night with a dagger at my throat?"

"Get out, you bastard! If I see you again I'll have you in chains!"

The lord's eyes flashed. "Oh, rest assured you'll see me in Logos. I'll save some Technocrats for you, if you get there quickly enough. And you'll see me again in the Royal Senate when I hang you from the rafters!"

"The knights won't follow you! I am the commander of this invasion."

Gideon laughed bitterly. "Nathaniel the Dragonslayer, leader of knights and assassin of the Shirron! We'll see who

they follow, General. Mark my words, the only cavalry you'll command will plod around on ridgebacks."

When the nobleman vanished through the tent flap, General Nathaniel stormed back to the wooden crate. With a growl he swatted aside the brandy bottle and both glasses, which smashed to pieces on the hard ground. Catching his breath, he stared at the twinkling glass shards. With a frown he murmured, "Forgive me, Annabel. I do it for us." Then he banged his fist on the crate, pounding the wooden lid back into place. The noise rang loudly in his ears.

As dawn broke over the city of Ishpur, the sun threw golden beams upon a multitude of crystal spires. The translucent structures captured the light and multiplied it across endless facets in a vast, dazzling spectacle. Each spire comprised a Matriarch's abode, busy with attendants of the Mystic and Warrior castes. The streets thronged with Meer and their birdlike ostarid mounts. The hum of their voices echoed from the glassy buildings. Beyond the city stretched the plains and jungles of Avenosh, in which Ishpur shone like a sparkling jewel, a crystal garden in a verdant tableau.

From a balcony on a particular spire, Fairfax reclined on a pallet of pillows and watched the theatrics of the sunrise. He was dressed in a filmy robe of lush silk. Beside him rested a plate of fruits of odd shapes and colors. In his hand perched a cup of satiny wine.

A commotion interrupted his tranquillity. He glanced behind him to see Jatha stomping onto the wide balcony. The wizard's colorful Mystic robes tossed about him as he marched angrily to his companion's side.

Fairfax chuckled and shook his head. "Do the Matriarchs

only give audience before breakfast? They must prefer their subjects in a chipper mood."

"The cowardly old harpies!"

"Is that any way to speak of your elders? No wonder they chased you off all those years ago."

Jatha bared his teeth. "You wouldn't say that if you spoke to them yourself. They sit on their glass thrones and dream that their feet will never get muddy!"

"Ishpur is excruciatingly clean, I do confess. Do they never feed those ostards? But I can see that you've made some demand which your grandmother outrageously chose to disobey. Tell me, exalted Patriarch, what cowardice do they manifest?"

"We are on the brink of a terrible crisis and they do nothing more than lounge in their temples and talk!"

"Which crisis is that? Not the war, surely."

"Not just the war. It's treachery of the most heinous regard. Kavah's treachery."

"He did appear to have an unseemly amount of fun with Valente's beacon."

"Unseemly indeed! The power of the beacon is too great for any man to wield."

"Why, what can he do with it?" He sipped his wine and swallowed quickly. "Nay, permit me to conjecture. It is 'forbidden' magic in the ubiquitous, wizardly sense of the word."

"It is just that! Nor can I tell you much more without breaking an oath to Dame Sayaru. Suffice to say that our world may be in peril."

"Please, not before breakfast."

"Listen, I've worked out Kavah's scheme. He created the Pact of Four to convince the Royal Senate to invade Logosia.

It was a strategic maneuver. While the archmages are gone, unable to hinder him, Kavah has captured that nexus point on Valente's property. He's got another one under his control in the caves of Deceit. And there's a third nexus point in Logos, or near it, that he's eager to capture, as well."

"He is a captivating man."

"He's churlishly cunning. You see, with Logosia under attack, Blackthorn's attention will focus on repelling the invaders. That will free Kavah to secure the third nexus point. If he succeeds, Fairfax, his power will be greater than anyone can control."

"I begin to understand why the Technocrats lock up their alchemy inside machines. Wheels and gears seem more reliable than greedy wizards."

"If you understood even a dram of sorcery, you would never say such a thing. Magic belongs in skilled hands, not iron machines. But your mind is simple, like the food in Yew, so I absolve you of blame for that remark."

"I rather like the food in Yew, in a boiled tuber sort of manner. But O great, effulgent Patriarch, pray enlighten me. How do you propose that the Matriarchs ought to proceed? Should they mount their chariots and ride forth to do battle with Kavah? That would be a parade to catch the eye, though their gowns might billow with frightening portent."

"They have no interest in battle. It's their greatest strength and their greatest weakness."

"How is it a government of women shows such restraint? Most lasses I know are absolutely promiscuous with their violence. Especially in the last month or so."

"Flowers attract honeybees. Sweat attracts mosquitoes. If you'd remember that, your love life would improve a thousandfold. And if you want to know my counsel, I told Sayaru

that the Matriarchs need to send the Warrior caste to secure the nexus point in New Britannia. Several thousand Hunters should be able to control that valley until the archmages return. Especially since the wisps would be their allies. Then the Matriarchs themselves should travel to Logosia, stop Kavah and free the Ishpurian ambassador."

"Slow down. The ambassador?"

"Dame Adhayah. Apparently she's been missing for several weeks. The Matriarchs use dreams to communicate with each other and she has been out of contact. It can only mean that Kavah has locked her away somewhere that's enchanted with powerful spells."

"Or maybe she's just dead."

Jatha shook his head. "The Matriarchs would know. The ambassador is both alive and imprisoned. Nor will she free herself, if it means violence against her captors."

"One wonders how the caste survived for thousands of years."

"It's a testament to the power of harmony. Pacifism is the cornerstone of Matriarchal magic. Like it or not, it has made them the most potent magicians in Sosaria."

"To what end, though, if the power is never used?"

"That is the very question I posed to Dame Sayaru! Some emergencies require force. But the Matriarchs will never agree to it, the squawking old crows."

"Then why do you have that look in your eye?"

"What look?"

"Hungry anticipation. In years past, I have relied upon that look as an omen of fresh debauchery. In the last six months, however, I have come to associate it with causes and crusades. I have a feeling that you have a feeling that something can be done without the Matriarchs."

Jatha grinned. "You know me too well."

"I have often said so."

He pointed a finger at the ranger. "My crass but intrepid friend, you and I must hurry to Logosia and set things straight. If we can rescue the ambassador she may help us stop Kavah's scheme. Unlike the Matriarchs here in Ishpur, Dame Adhayah is already waist-deep in the muck. And she doesn't have to kill anyone if we do it for her, right?"

"Slayers in the service of peace. Why not? We have certainly slain for lesser rewards. But didn't we try to perforate Kavah once already? I carried your carcass for two weeks afterward. My dignity still smarts when the weather turns."

"He was drawing his power from the nexus then. I'll gladly pit my spells against him under different circumstances. Besides, you and I shall not undertake this adventure by ourselves. There's someone in Logosia whose aid we must solicit for the task."

"You don't believe Lady Aria's tale about Montenegro being alive, do you?"

"Of course not. I'm talking about Way Master Thulann of Garron."

"Capital plan! We did not see enough of the old turtle after that business with Braun's Needle. But how shall we find her? She travels more than a seaman's rash."

"Her clan is mustered on the western shore of Logosia, preparing to meet the New Britannians as they arrive."

"You sound very confident of that."

"The Matriarchs have monitored the conflict fastidiously. Apparently voyeurism is an essential component of pacifism."

Fairfax laughed. "Will they grant us the use of a ship, as well, so they can spy on us as we embark on our quest?"

"We shall do better, my friend. Dame Sayaru has not been entirely unaccommodating. She has agreed to cook up a wild moongate to take us to Logosia."

The human whistled. "That's no small feat, if I recall our journey to Garron two years back. She must be frightfully anxious to see us off."

Jatha selected a purple fruit from his companion's platter. He bit through the skin and savored the sweet nectar. With a brimming mouth he noted, "It's your presence among her granddaughters that quickens her resolve. She doesn't approve of a serpent among the eggs."

Fairfax grumbled, "An apt comparison, alas, for every one of your fair sisters is locked inside a shell. I'll need a hammer and chisel just to get a kiss."

"Courtship among Mystics is a formal ritual. I daresay you don't qualify to participate."

"It's not the rules that thwart me. It's the girls' insistence upon following them. I find myself longing for Shavade's brisk candor. Now there's a woman who skewers laws and men to get what she desires."

Jatha swallowed a bite and groaned, "By all that's merciful, please don't start that again."

"I hope she didn't die in that valley. I never won her smile. If I could do that, I would be satisfied."

The wizard spat a seed over the edge of the balcony. "Fairfax, you'll never be satisfied. You have all the restraint of a sotted berserker. Now start deciding how to say good-bye to my sisters while retaining some particle of dignity. The moongate should be ready in a day or two. We'll set out as soon as possible."

Fairfax lifted his cup to the glimmering city before him, shining copper and amber in the streaming dawn. "Alas, radi-

ant Ishpur, too briefly did our lips meet. But danger now calls me from your crystalline arms. You know, Jatha, for everything I sacrifice on your lamentable behalf, I ask so little in return. You would think I might demand something for myself, wouldn't you?"

Jatha sucked a drop of sweet juice from his lip, then chuckled. "You would think so, you wormy hound. You would think so."

12

The Black Veil

Thulann's black, flowing gown streamed at the cusp of an ocean breeze. A dark veil pressed against her face. The elderly Juka stood on a high, flat rock, as tall and straight as the walking staff she carried. Her slim figure parted the cool, salty wind. Overhead the sky was steely and low, a snarl of clouds that diffused the morning light to a dull character. The breakers on the beach heaved a whispering sigh.

The flat ground between the mountains and the sea was filled with Jukan troops. The splendid army of Clan Kumar was arrayed in parade formation, a glittering composition of shields and spears in crisp geometry. Five thousand clansmen stood at attention with armor polished and weapons presented. Their colorful banners lashed the wind. No other sounds emerged from the ranks.

To the south gathered a second force, nearly a thousand in number. These were the soldiers of Clan Eryem with their triangular flags and painted armor. Their many-oared longboats lined the rocky shore. At their head was Warlord Savan astride his giant ridgeback, in the posture of an arro-

gant chieftain. Since his army had arrived, his proper place was among them.

Strangest of all was the ocean of steel that gleamed on the far side of Clan Eryem; for the knights of New Britannia had arrived unexpectedly as the muster began. A thousand strong, the silver warriors rode proudly atop their strapping horses. Tassels and ribbons adorned the slender-legged mounts. The knights' long, barbed lances were raised in a vertical salute. Their polished armor reflected the clouds. Every helmet displayed a crest unique to the knight who wore it, composing a sea of rainbow colors. A single banner raised above them, bearing the emblem of the Silver Serpent.

But the pageant of military strength was a distant backdrop for Thulann. Her attention lingered atop the flat rock on which she stood. Beside her waited Toria in a formal gown, the Way Master's constant attendant, but the other members of the ritual party each fulfilled a precise ceremonial role. General Fekhet and the other high officers saluted with drawn swords. A collection of robed loresingers formed a half-circle and chanted an undulating song. Tekmhat of Clan Eryem knelt in ritual supplication. And in the center of the gathering was Venduss of Garron in a suit of exquisite armor, his face locked into a reverent frown. With well-rehearsed precision he led the ritual that confirmed him as the chieftain of Clan Kumar.

Thulann's training compelled her to monitor the particulars of the display, but the deeper parts of her mind lay elsewhere. On the entire coast, only a handful of Kumar clansmen were absent from the coronation of the new warlord. These few gathered around a pillar of smoke that rose from the north side of the encampment. They were Tur-

logan's keeners, weeping shrilly around the slain chieftain's pyre. They would continue to do so for fifty days as prescribed by Jukan lore, accompanying the ashes back to Garon where priests would lay them to rest in the clan's tomb. The task of keening was difficult but essential. The funeral was now over, Turlogan's Life Song had been chanted to the Blessed Halls of Honor by his only son, and the new chieftain was nearly confirmed. All that remained for Turlogan's soul was the lamentation of the keeners, whose wails even now could be heard over the solemn ritual.

Thulann herself wore a keener's veil. Her cries, however, had no voice and no tears.

The Jukan healers had done what they could, but Turlogan had passed beyond their help. The assassin had been expert in his work. Perhaps a New Britannian archmage might have conjured back Turlogan's spirit, as Master Gregorio had once done with Venduss, but no such wizard had been on hand and that miracle was only possible within a few hours of death. And so did Turlogan receive a fatal answer to his rejection of Lector Gaff's surrender.

But the truth had to be more complex. The facts were clear. Turlogan had been killed by stealth. A battle would have certainly drawn attention. In all likelihood Turlogan would have beaten any assassin, even one as deadly as Montenegro. But Thulann could not accept that Montenegro would have cut a sleeping man's throat, continued to stab him until he was dead, then selectively mutilated certain organs to ensure that no healer could rekindle the spark of life. To be sure, the knight had the skills for it. He was a lethal bladesman. He had the requisite knowledge of healing magic, having fought beside spellcasters all of his life. He carried the potions of invisibility. He *could* have murdered

Turlogan, but she did not want to believe that he *would* have. He had ruthlessness in his heart, but he had tamed it. She had seen him tame it.

If she looked into his eyes, she could be certain.

On the rocks before her the confirmation ended and Warlord Venduss announced himself to the mustered troops. He shouted the order to march for Logos. The warriors cheered their new leader and rushed to move out. But the next hour found Thulann in her sizable tent, packing a single shoulder bag. Toria helped, though the girl looked despondent. "I just don't understand how you can leave, Thulann. Today of all days."

The Way Master still wore her mourning costume. She spoke from beneath a near-opaque veil. "Venduss has Fekhet and Savan to guide him. He does not need my counsel."

"You know that's not true."

"It is his own choice. I have advised him against marching on Junction and Logos, just as I advised his father. And just as his father did, he ignores my words."

Toria leveled an incredulous stare. "That's ridiculous! After the assassination, every one of those soldiers outside would give his life to avenge the Shirron. There's no turning back now. You know that."

The old Juka shook her head. "Do we vote upon our strategies now? Leaders are obliged to make unpopular decisions. Venduss's grandmother knew that when she was chieftain."

"That's not fair. Turlogan himself couldn't live up to Narah's legacy. Why are you acting this way? Everyone's looking to you for guidance and you're hiding behind that veil."

"They look to Venduss, not to me."

"You're not that naive, Thulann!"

The Way Master stuffed a fold of clothes into the sack with a brusque action. Her voice lowered a register. "And how naive are you, Toria?"

The human girl paused, then reached a tentative hand for Thulann. "I'm sorry, Mistress. I didn't mean to . . . I know this has been terrible for you. I'm sorry."

Thulann clasped Toria's fingers and squeezed. "Do not pity this old warrior. I have lost more friends in my lifetime than you would be able to count. I shall carry on." Her throat began to swell. She let go of the girl's hand before emotion overcame her.

The minstrel picked up a scabbard and short sword and commenced a ritual binding for travel. "This would be easier if you'd tell us where you're going. What you're doing. Tekmhat thinks you're riding to Garron ahead of the keeners."

"That would be unwise. Now that Bahrok calls himself Shirron, I expect the city will be overrun by his soldiers. It will not be a friendly place for prominent members of Clan Kumar."

"Then where are you going? I never thought you would leave Venduss's side."

Thulann sighed. "Nor shall I, when the time comes. But right now I remain at Turlogan's side. I must do so until honor is satisfied."

Toria blinked. "You're off to avenge him." Thulann made no reply. "So where does that road go? To Bahrok? He must have had a part in this."

"Undoubtedly. But I have to be sure. I shall find the assassin first and then follow his leash."

"You don't think Montenegro really did it?"

The Juka took the bound short sword and placed it in the bag. "I shall ask him."

"You're going to Logos!" Toria's face turned anxious. "Mistress, that'll be very dangerous."

"It will be more dangerous if I wait until our armies surround it."

The girl looked down. "I can't go with you, Mistress. I'm staying with Venduss."

"I know, child."

"They're having the wedding on the march and I promised Tekmhat I'd be there."

"Toria. Of course you must stay with the army. I need you to take over my duties as spymaster."

The human looked stunned. "Me?"

"You have assisted me for two years. You know my work. You know my operatives and they know you. I need you to keep gathering intelligence in my absence. The invasion will be crippled without it." She smiled sadly, though Toria could not see it. "Venduss needs you more than I do. Stay at his side."

"I'm worried that I won't see you again."

She took the girl's hand once more. "Few things are certain, child, but this is one: I am proud of you and Venduss both. If you are the legacy I leave to this world, I shall walk boldly into the Blessed Halls of Honor."

Toria's eyes misted as she embraced Thulann. For long moments they held one another, then the Way Master pulled back. "Enough. Say good-bye to the warlord for me. I shall not interrupt his business for this womanly foolishness."

"Lord Gideon wants a meeting before you leave."

"Give him my apologies. You can act in my stead now."

Remember, he is a lord and a senator but he is also a noble warrior. Treat him with respect, be forthright, and he shall do the same for you."

The girl swallowed. "Yes, Mistress."

"Farewell, Toria. Tread softly and wisely. You are one root of a mighty tree."

She did not look behind her when she exited the tent. As she walked from the camp she passed Venduss's tall pavilion. The young warrior stood outside conversing with the plate-armored Lord Gideon. Thulann knew that the knight would not recognize her in the black veil and robe of a keener, so she paused to indulge in one final image of Venduss. The youth had grown into a handsome chieftain. He was brash and foolish, but so had his father been all those decades ago. He would survive these trials. They would strengthen him daily. Someday he might even challenge for the title of Shirron. She would watch that hour with pride from the afterlife.

The young warlord glanced up and saw her. She gave him a nod, though the windblown veil resisted her, and then she left him behind. One day she might stand beside him again. For the moment, however, she had a duty to Turlogan. She was a keener, after all, though she would force the wails from the throats of the guilty.

In the mountains above the striking encampment she came upon two figures. They wore the leather armor of New Britannian travelers. The taller of the pair, a Meer, bowed when she approached. The other, whose hair was a thicket of flaxen tangles, crossed his arms and frowned.

"What treachery is this?" asked Fairfax. "You want us to leave without saying hello to Toria?"

Thulann set down her bag and pulled off her veil. "I did

not ask you to wait for me here just to take you back down to the beach again. You must trust my judgment. Toria needs no reminders of home right now. This is a dire time for her and for Venduss. He is marrying Tekmhat of Jamark in a few days. Her heart is breaking."

The ranger squinted. "All the more reason for us to cheer her up, right?"

Jatha laid a hand on his companion's shoulder. "For a change, try to use that boiled tuber you call a brain. They're marching off to war. Toria needs to focus on the invasion, not pine for New Britannia. She's got a minstrel's soul, prone to daydreams and wandering. We would be an all-too-welcome distraction."

The Way Master fished dark garments from the bag. "Besides, we have to make for Logos as quickly as possible. I want to get there well before any troops. Now put on these clothes so we can blend with the locals."

The Meer wizard grinned. "I shall have a difficult time passing for a Logosian."

"Nonsense," murmured Thulann as she handed him a long scarf. "Wrap it around your head so that only your eyes show. It is not an uncommon fashion for desert travelers."

Jatha grimaced. "I should wear a full mask in the desert heat? By my ancestors, this is an inhospitable place. Take me back to the swamps of Deceit."

"You can carry yourself this time," grumbled Fairfax.

As Thulann unbelted her robe she said, "We shall be there in less than a week. Let us try to minimize our complaining during that time. If Montenegro and Lector Gaff are amicable, we may solve both of our problems shortly thereafter. If they are not amicable, however, we shall see hardship far greater than warm, sunny days."

The wizard chuckled. "Ah, but I have missed your blithe demeanor, Thulann."

The Way Master paid them no attention as she changed into her Logosian disguise. The world seemed oddly remote. A more immediate sensation hit her—she felt Turlogan's presence, strongly, physically, as if his ghost walked at her side. The feeling was both wonderful and frightening. She sensed herself moving in a twilight between life and death, between dark and light, between Shirron Turlogan and Warlord Venduss. It was a thin, taut sort of limbo that compelled her never to stop. As long as she kept walking Turlogan would still walk beside her. She imagined she might walk until the last day of her life.

And the terrible day came when Lord Blackthorn declared war on the King. The knight-wizard rode before Sir Lazaro and said, "I have given you a priceless gift and now I ask something in return. Stand with me against the King and repay your debt."

And Sir Lazaro replied, "I shall not stand with you, for on the day I became a knight I pledged my sword to the King."

"If you stand with the King," said Lord Blackthorn, "then you stand as my enemy."

"That is not my desire but I am compelled by my oath. I should rather be an honored enemy than a dishonored friend."

And so did Sir Lazaro uphold the Virtue of Honor, though it would soon cost him his life.

In the electric glow of the Technocrat workshop, Montenegro watched as Brother Barghast's apprentices took apart his mechanical steed. Its chest comprised a remarkable number of steel plates in a curved shell. Underneath was a frame of heavy bars and a dizzying mass of axles and

wheels. He saw gears with strange, irregular cogs that rocked on and off as the tinkers moved the horse's limbs. In the center of the chest cavity perched the copper levitant tank. It connected to chains that drove the propeller inside. And along the flanks of the machine rested the rods and folded leather of the batwing levitant vanes, which the apprentices began to dismantle. The knight studied the work with intense care, as if to block out the words of Master Enosh, who sat fidgeting beside him.

The brawny Juka flustered, "I'm only saying, Cavalier, that honor is complex. You know I don't take it lightly. We have only served together a few months, it's true, but the brigade is part of you now. What honor is there in joining the Knights of the Silver Serpent and fighting against us?"

Montenegro mumbled, "I have always been a knight, Shirron. When we fought Clan Varang I was still a knight. I made an oath. If they ride out, I must ride with them."

"But that oath was invalidated when they expelled you! Since then you've lived in Logosia. You've seen who we are. You know we are not monsters."

"I have also seen dark things in this land. Repulsive things."

"And have you no dark things in New Britannia? Your trolls and orcs and dragons are superior to our Overlord machines?"

"I have taken the measure of orcs and goblins, but your machines are boundlessly wicked."

"You're trying to steel yourself against us, even though you know it will not work. I am not your enemy." He massaged the flesh around the base of his stout horns. "To be truthful, I'm not even sure why New Britannia is invading us at all."

"Old grievances die hard. And don't forget, it was Blackthorn who struck the first blow."

Enosh sneered, "Lector Sartorius sent the armada to Britain, not the Techno-Prophet."

"The Royal Senate makes no distinction. A warship the size of a mountain was sent to attack the capital. That is not a deed they are likely to dismiss."

"You know that Sartorius betrayed us all. The honorable response is to reject his manipulation. That's what brought me to Khyber's Brigade in the first place. I wanted to beat the right enemy."

Montenegro said nothing. He observed as tinkers unbolted the wheels that controlled the mechanical horse's wings. They hefted more massive assemblies into place, then tested the controls. The new wheels chirred and tilted with a distinctly heavier sound.

"So that's your decision?" muttered Enosh. "You're going to join the Silver Serpents and try your hardest to kill me? Is that what you think is right? Is that what you think is honorable?"

The knight remained silent. His instinct, of course, was to swiftly address any challenge to his honor. His tongue moved inside his mouth, ready to bark a stern response. But the truth of the matter was, he had no answer to Enosh's question. He had waited for his heart to instruct him but it was black and empty. He did not know where Honor lay. He was unsure if it lay anywhere at all.

In the days since his failure against Warlord Bahrok, the numbness inside him had never faded. Instead it had become a place that he dared not look, for if Honor had been satisfied with his defeat, then he had failed to uphold the legacy of his grandfather. He had lost the final vestige of New Britannia. He no longer had a home.

He renounced that conclusion and turned away from his heart. Instead he relied upon the trappings of Honor, like his oath to the Silver Serpents, to inform his decisions. He had vowed to rejoin his old company of knights and fight whatever Technocrats they met. The thought of crossing steel with brigadesmen put an ache into his chest, but his life, if he were to be honest, was a parade of such dark moments. He had always survived them before. Perhaps the Virtue of Humility demanded that he bear the pain.

But he had not yet announced his decision to Brigadier Khyber. The words had never quite formed on his tongue.

From a workbench the tinkers moved in tandem to lift a massive, black component. It was long, flat and jointed. When they attached it to the mechanical horse its shape became obvious. The new control vane resembled an eagle's wing in giant scale. Its length was jagged with black, steel feathers. When they fastened the second wing in place Montenegro stepped between the workers and leapt atop the automaton. He nudged the reins. The new mechanisms reacted just as the old ones had. He worked the controls until the wings pointed nearly straight up, forming a barrier on either side of him. Then he tried a few, subtle adjustments. He smiled. With practice the machine would be responsive enough to use the wings like shields, while leaving both his hands free. He could invent new schools of mounted combat if the footing proved nimble enough in battle.

"How tough are these feathers?" he asked the Technocrats.

"Resilient as kinetic armor, I would estimate," replied one of them.

Montenegro thumped a wing and grinned. Here, at least,

was a companion whose allegiance was beyond question. Whatever cause he might honor, this machine would serve him faithfully. He patted the creature's armored neck and murmured, "Steady on, Humbolt."

"I see you are well accustomed to our technology now."

The luxurious voice flooded his body with warmth. He looked toward the staircase to find two new arrivals in the workshop. Brigadier Khyber wore an unpleasant expression, as had been his custom for a week now. Beside him was a tall, slender figure in the grey robe of a Mathematician. No one had told Montenegro that Sister Raveka was in the city. Even in her austere raiment, she looked like paradise to him.

He grinned and sprang from the automaton. In the presence of the others she would maintain the demeanor of a Mathematician, but at that moment he was not interested in decorum. He strode before her and cried, "My lady!" Then he took her hand and kissed the knuckle. He noticed that she wore equations painted on her hands and face. Apparently she had been in Junction for a few hours, at least.

Frostily she replied, "My good sir knight."

"Come," he said, leading her away, "I want to hear about your adventures."

Abruptly Khyber snapped, "Cavalier!"

Montenegro lifted an eyebrow.

"Have you made your decision?"

"Soon."

The officer grimaced. "Tonight. I mean that. I can't wait any longer."

Montenegro nodded, then led Raveka to the back room that had been his home for several months. When they were alone he took her in his arms. The curves and volume of her lean body were exquisite to the touch, like the landscape of

home. He pulled back her hood, cupped her neck and pressed her painted face to his own. Their lips ignited with passion.

In a lull Raveka giggled, "I surmise that you have missed me."

He laughed. "What happened to your hair?"

"I traveled with the fleet in disguise. It was remarkably successful. Once I marched right in front of Lord Gideon and he didn't recognize me."

He touched a finger to her lips. "I don't want to hear about Gideon. Not yet." Then he kissed her again and the war vanished for a while.

They lay together on his narrow cot and she recounted in broad detail the story of her journey to New Britannia and back. In turn he told her of his life as a Technocrat soldier. The feeling of release was cathartic. Though every inch of her was marked with mathematical symbols, he still regarded her as a New Britannian. For the first time in months he could talk at leisure to a fellow countryman. And of course her touch, her breath, her presence were magical in spite of everything else. The longer he remained in her company, the more of a thrill charged his body. He was amused by the reaction. "By the Virtues, you are a delirium to me."

"Is that a compliment?"

"It's a deliverance."

She laid her head on his chest. "Then stay here with me, Gabriel."

He chuckled. "You mean fight on the side of Blackthorn? Would that it were so simple."

"Why isn't it?"

"For two reasons. One, I am a knight. I'm not about to war against New Britannian soldiers. Two, you have given

me your vow that no matter where I go, you will follow me. So if I decide to ride with the Silver Serpents, you must ride with them as well."

"Do *you* think it is that simple?"

He kissed the top of her head. "Yes."

She nestled closer. "Perhaps. I don't want to leave you and I certainly won't fight you. But you've forgotten the logic of your position, my love."

"What logic?"

"You are here to fight the Pact of Four. If you join the knights, you can't ride against General Nathaniel or Warlord Bahrok."

He stifled a sigh. "I can fight them in other ways."

"Your skill lies in battle. That's why you joined Khyber in the first place." She tucked her arm under his. She felt splendidly soft. "And what's more important, if you leave here you'll never touch Lector Sartorius. Our only chance of reaching him is from within."

He nodded. His chest tightened a bit. "Maybe so."

"I know where he is. I overheard it when I spied on their meeting. He's holding the Meer ambassador somewhere under the city."

Montenegro looked at her sharply. "Are you certain that's what they said?"

"I informed His Excellency already. He is going to investigate it." She kissed his throat. "Sartorius will surely have automatons to defend him. Maybe dreadnoughts. But we can kill him by other means."

"That has a sinister ring to it."

"We can use stealth. Shoot him from hiding and flee. Khyber will agree, it's the surest way to evade dreadnoughts."

He grunted, "You're talking about assassination."

"We must fight however we can. I have to do it in my work. I'm almost good at it now. I'd never ask you to compromise the Virtues, but you have to accept the reality that we cannot meet every challenge face-to-face. What good have we accomplished if we lose?" Then she raised her head and rested her palms on his chest. "Oh, Gabriel, I'm sorry. I wasn't talking about your duel with Bahrok."

He closed his eyes. "Yes, you were. I take your point, Raveka, believe me."

She crossed her hands to make a pillow. "There's no shame in losing face-to-face, my love. I mean that. Somebody has to fall first. What's shameful is to lose the whole war because of it."

"'Victory is a necessary evil.' That was my motto once."

"I'm not saying you should forget the lessons you've learned. I simply mean you have to respect Khyber's way of operating, too."

"You're trying to convince me to become a Technocrat assassin."

She pinched his side. "Gabriel! I'm trying to get you to look past the oath you gave to the Silver Serpents so many years ago. You're a different man now. Look around you and see what's important at this very moment. Listen to your heart, my love."

In fact he was listening. What he heard was Raveka's voice. She called out from that place he dared not look. It was childish romanticism, he knew, but she absolved him of defeat. The feel of her overwhelmed his doubt.

And most interesting of all, she was talking sense.

He squeezed her firmly and kissed her brow. "Raveka, I shall stay here with you. It's time to bring down the Pact of Four."

Her long, brown eyes closed. Even amid a swirl of mathematical symbols, her smile was a thing of glory.

The plume of smoke was visible from many miles away. It was a giant, tilting column in the center of an acrid desert. Its yellow-grey billows poured into the sky, feeding an expanse of ugly, stagnant clouds that lingered overhead. When Thulann, Jatha and Fairfax rode their ridgebacks closer, they spotted below the smoke the distant cities of Junction and Logos. From far away they looked like thin charcoal smudges, one floating just above the other. The plume rose from them in relentless gouts.

Fairfax wiped the sweat and grime from his eyes. "This place makes no sense. I see a city that must be burning, but I see no fire."

Thulann answered, "It is the smoke from their factories. They are preparing to be attacked. No doubt they are producing an extra weapon or two."

"What a stink!" spat Jatha from beneath his facial windings. "Behold the glory of Blackthorn. I'm shocked they ever convinced a Matriarch to come here."

The ranger muttered, "And to think we left Ishpur for this garden of filth. This is why we avoid political causes, my friend. They always seem to lead to the most dismal pocks on the face of the world."

In the guise of Logosian travelers they rode toward the distant cities. Parades of refugees converged there as well, abandoning towns and villages for the shelter of the capital. Long streams of families and livestock plodded through the cruel desert. Thulann knew they feared the approach of Warlord Bahrok. As in Akar, she felt pity for these bedraggled souls. They were the losers in this war,

victims of the pride of great men. Their weary faces cried out in silence.

Also marching toward the two cities were companies of Technocrat soldiers. She noticed a profusion of older men in the ranks, as well as boys hardly old enough to fight. This would be the last stand of Blackthorn's people. Every resource would be put into play. Lector Sartorius intended to fight to the last man, sacrificing these conscripted soldiers to force Blackthorn himself into the fray. Then the archmages of New Britannia would bring down the mad tyrant, leaving Sartorius to rule the nation.

Thulann had no love for Blackthorn, but Sartorius would be a scant improvement. And she did feel compassion for the people of Logosia. They had suffered enough.

But none of it mattered until Turlogan was laid to rest. Presently he was with her still, riding at her elbow.

On the outskirts of Junction, Thulann felt an eerie sense that she had seen this sight before. The city was a sprawl of factories, tangled with pipework and silos and flame vents, thrusting smokestacks obscenely into the air. Like tributaries flowing into a river did each chimney pour its fumes into the great pillar of smoke in the sky. And ornamenting the plume itself were dozens of airships. Thulann recalled the picture of Akar in flames, with the attacking airships hovering above it like lanterns in a tree.

But these craft had come to defend, not to destroy. In fact, they were presently aiding in construction. Around the perimeter of the city, a great, steel wall was being erected. Serving as floating cranes, many airships hoisted tall slabs of metal into position. Juggernauts muscled each slab to fit with its neighbor. Tech drones swarmed the wall, riveting the segments together. Directing the project was a force of

Technocrat engineers. They employed steam whistles with tall pipes to bleat coded instructions to the workers and automatons. The operation looked quite efficient. Thulann expected the wall might be complete in as little as a few days.

But the city's passive defenses were not its most impressive sight. The barren fields around it were black with Technocrat legions. At first guess Thulann decided twenty thousand soldiers had mustered to defend the capital. Among them were platoons of fearsome juggernauts, divisions of ridgeback-mounted cavalry and of course the endless, baroque war machines that conjured such fear in their enemies. Even so many days before battle, great iron drums boomed the pulse of the mechanized army.

Her stomach felt hollow. Montenegro had not exaggerated. The Technocrats were well prepared to protect themselves. She could already envision the acres of clansmen who must die to capture Junction. And a thousand feet above the city, like a smaller reflection, lurked the floating enclave of Logos itself. It connected to the earth by great chains that looked like wispy strands from a distance. Even when Junction fell, Logos would be a supreme challenge. She did not know how the Pact of Four was planning to undertake that assault. As a general her own scenarios had involved commandeering mass numbers of airships, though she had little confidence it would work. Blackthorn was effectively unreachable. Siege was the only real answer and in the middle of a desert, it was hardly a pleasant one.

When they reached the city, the trio blended among the refugees crowding the streets. A band of soldiers confiscated their ridgebacks. They offered no resistance. In the haze of fumes they withdrew into an alley and spoke in sullen tones.

"We must find an air carriage," said Thulann, "to take us up to Logos."

Fairfax muttered, "But the Meer ambassador is somewhere under Junction. You said Montenegro was with Khyber down there, securing the defensive machines."

She nodded. "Montenegro may well be underneath us, but unless you know of an entrance, we must find a local guide. The man I choose is Lector Gaff. He controls the Order of Mathematicians from a tower in Logos. He will take us to Montenegro."

Jatha grimaced. "Lector Gaff! We're just going to sashay into his office and charm him into helping us? At least our heads will look good when they're piked."

Thulann snorted, "If you refrain from injudicious commentary, there should be no pikes involved. Lector Gaff knows who I am. He sent Montenegro to contact me. When I am in his power I see no reason why he will not allow me to speak with Montenegro."

"Brilliant," grumbled Fairfax. "Your logic is breathtaking. What happens if Montenegro turns out to be your assassin? I doubt Gaff is going to hand you a sword and ask him to kneel."

She narrowed her one eye. "If Montenegro is the assassin, I shall not need a sword to kill him. Bare hands will be more satisfying, would you not agree?"

The ranger glanced at his companion. "What did I tell you? Promiscuous with violence. Even the old ones."

Jatha ignored the comment, at the behest of the Way Master's frown.

Sparks crashed through the gloom as the tech drones tore loose a huge piece of ruined machinery. In the mechanical

tunnels under Junction, a crew of the strange automatons was digging through the whorl of twisted metal that clogged the route to the lower levels. Brother Barghast was the foreman of the operation. The young soldier named Piper stood beside him with his steam whistle, tooting coded commands as the Mathematician instructed him. In the light of several buzzing spark lanterns, a gap in the blockage began to show through. Younger Technocrats of the Order of Engineers shooed aside the tech drones and climbed the wreckage for a closer look.

"We shall be through within hours," said Barghast to the three people in front of him. Montenegro nodded as he observed the workers. His grey eyes revealed impatience. His hand rested on the small of Raveka's back. The tall woman wore her Mathematician's raiment and, for the second day, the painted equations on her skin. Also with them was Brigadier Khyber, who shook his head and mumbled, "Please, Brother. I don't want to go down there without any idea what to expect. You must be able to give us some advice where the Pact of Four might be holding the Meer ambassador."

The Juka shrugged. "I fear not, sir. My knowledge of the lower levels is unfortunately quite small. I can tell you that I believe the entire tunnel system is shaped like an inverted cone. The lower you go, the less floor space you shall need to search."

"That's some consolation," said the brigadier.

Barghast added, "But my research has suggested the nature of some dangers you might face. Montenegro, you explained to me about a sword that Pikas of Enclave carried. One that streams electric energy into whatever it strikes. Such a weapon was once employed by those in the favor of

the Overlords. It was known as arc weaponry. The construction was extremely limited and quite secretive. I believe it may have required the intervention of the Overlords themselves."

The knight squinted. "Huh. So you think Pikas, or someone else in the Pact of Four, might have found it down there."

"It's very possible. No arc weapons have been recorded since the Cataclysm, but the upper tunnels of this particular complex were sealed off by Kumar's rebels before then. There is a high probability that the deeper we go, the more we shall find undisturbed Overlord technology."

Montenegro sighed grimly.

"That's fascinating," grunted Khyber, "but I'm more interested in the creature that did this." He pointed to the gigantic clog of machinery in the tunnel. "If that thing is still down there, I want to know how to kill it."

"I believe it is an automaton that the Juka slaves once called a 'salamander.' If one still exists, it would possess the correct traits to fashion this wall of metal." The Juka raised a finger as he explained, "Recall that the Overlords mined a great deal of their resources from lava under the earth. This defensive complex draws its power from one such magma stream. Now, in order to maintain the lava pumps and conduits, the Overlords built an automaton that thrives in such high temperatures. It had the ability to withstand immersion and it could transport reservoirs of magma when required. So, if one of these salamanders existed today, it might well contain enough heat to soften the metal like we see in this wreckage. And it was a heavy loader, so its strength would be comparable to a dreadnought."

The brigadier grimaced. "That sounds plausible, if not terribly heartening. How do we kill it?"

"I doubt you can. The organic portion would be heavily armored to protect it from the heat. If it contains reservoirs of molten ore, you certainly don't want to hack it open. I would suggest striking its appendages and attempting to render it immobile."

Sister Raveka interjected, "But our best approach is not to face it at all. If the Pact of Four is aware of us, they can escape using Kavah's black crystals. If we find them by stealth, we can surprise whoever is there. Perhaps we can finish them before they even know they've been infiltrated."

Montenegro grimaced but said nothing. Raveka had a point—they could not afford to lose this battle—but he would not condone dishonorable tactics. He squeezed her waist to register his displeasure. She pretended to ignore him.

Then another soldier arrived and whispered into Khyber's ear. He exchanged murmurs with the man and then turned to Montenegro. "His Excellency has summoned you to his receiving chamber. It's a very urgent matter."

The group exchanged glances. To Raveka the knight said, "Take me there."

For less formal occasions Lector Gaff kept his audience chamber furtively lighted, to avoid informing his enemies when guests had arrived. The steam-laced room was webbed with shadows. A broad fan slowly pulled hot air from the metal enclosure. A thousand rivets shone as humidity polished their surfaces.

The figure standing before Montenegro looked uncomfortably gaunt. The old Juka was dressed in the unfettered clothes of a much younger Logosian woman. Her arms and

legs were bare, wiry and very aged. He had never seen Thulann in quite such detail; but her face elicited his strongest reaction. Her dour expression was genuinely frightening. He had seen the spectrum of emotions from the Way Master, but she had always grounded herself with either tranquillity or a controlled release of anger. But presently she glowered at him with the sheerest veil of composure. He watched her body tense as he drew near. Her single eye blazed with hatred. She was a heartbeat away from trying to kill him, even though she wore neither weapons nor armor.

He knew what fire burned inside her. Raveka had told him of the plot to murder Turlogan and to frame him for it. Judging by the Way Master's demeanor, the villainy had succeeded. His heart ached for the old woman.

And he knew exactly what she had come here for. He stepped in front of her using the calmest of movements. He focused both eyes upon her, inhaled deeply and said, "Thulann, it was Pikas of Enclave. It wasn't me."

The old warrior blinked. Her breath caught. Her white braids shivered where they were pinned up high.

Montenegro glanced at Gaff, Raveka and the two brigadesmen in the chamber. "Please, leave us." They did not go, but they turned away. Then he laid his arm across the Way Master's shoulders and pulled her into an embrace.

Thulann shed a tear on his cheek. In a few seconds she had regained control. She took a step back and thrust out her jaw. "Does your offer still stand? I am ready to take direct action against our enemies."

The knight opened a grin that was both sympathetic and eager. "As it happens, and for the first time I can recall, I am in a position to give you exactly what you want. Surely that bodes well for the endeavor."

Lector Gaff turned to face them again, folding his hands together. "Your skills are welcome in these dire times, Way Master Thulann." Coldly he added, "Do not abuse my hospitality."

She returned him a look as icy as his own. "Montenegro and I share Honor between us. That is what you must rely upon, Lector, for I shall give you nothing more."

As they rode an air carriage down to Junction they were accompanied by Jatha and Fairfax, who had hidden outside the Mathematicians' tower. They greeted Montenegro with warm camaraderie and jibes about his Logosian attire. Raveka, on the other hand, faced a somewhat cooler reception. Thulann gave her polite acknowledgment and nothing else. Fairfax and Jatha were more vocal. The ranger glanced over her dramatic appearance. "'Sister Raveka' is your actual name, then? So you do kill people in Blackthorn's service. You see, Jatha, I was correct. And you thought she was an agent of the Pact of Four."

The wizard protested, "I did not! That was your folly. I knew that someone so brutally calculating could only serve the Order of Mathematicians."

"If you please," said Montenegro with a frown. "I'll ask you to keep a civil head on your shoulders, or you may end up with none there at all."

Raveka touched his arm and said, "It is no trouble, Gabriel. I can bear the weight of misunderstanding."

Jatha's ears flattened. "Misunderstanding? You shot me in the throat!"

"Only because you left me no alternative. I had to defend myself from your irrational accusations. But under the present circumstances I forgive you."

The Meer looked at his companion and grumbled, "She

shoots me and is gracious enough to forgive me for bleeding. So much for famous Technocrat logic."

"Logic is an excellent servant," said the ranger, "for it is easily dismissed."

"Enough," growled Montenegro. As their carriage dropped through the pungent smoke of Junction, their thoughts turned to the task at hand. The ancient bowels of Logosia awaited them. The Pact of Four lurked in the darkness. Their own disagreements would pale before the dangers that they presently sought to awaken.

13

The Tomb

Brother Barghast guided the party through the entrance to the sealed-off tunnels, but the Jukan Mathematician did not join them. Thirty brigadesmen moved quietly downward and fanned out through the darkened complex. Their objective was to locate the Meer ambassador. They reasoned that she must be guarded and that rescuing her would draw out the Pact of Four. Joining the soldiers were Thulann, Montenegro, Sister Raveka, Jatha and Fairfax, who comprised a search unit among themselves.

As they crept through the steely gloom, Thulann scanned the tunnels with the aid of a miner's monocle. In shades of sepia she examined the endless bundles of pipes and gears and vents and gauges, all dormant and dusted with sand. Clearly this pit had been long abandoned. Yet the ghost of a sharper smell lingered, as if some great heat had recently cooked the rusty metal and desert silt. She saw few of the dry roots that had plagued the levels above. The Jukan engineer named Barghast had been correct. Something currently dwelled in this forgotten place. She wondered what evils the intrusion might stir.

When she was young, she had asked Shirron Narah about the Overlords. The old warrior had been a member of the Hand of Honor, leading the Jukan revolt against their slave-masters. Narah had seen the Overlords themselves. But she had been elusive about their nature. In her eyes Thulann had recognized a suppressed anxiety, as if she avoided the memory. When pressed she had offered the cryptic answer, "The tombs of the Overlords are empty." The statement had given Thulann chills. Her first thought was that their ancient masters had not perished at all, that they had somehow escaped the shackles of the grave. But in time she had deduced Narah's true meaning. The Overlords were gone entirely, body and spirit. By some alchemy they had fled the world. It was fruitless to seek knowledge about them, for all that remained were ruins and memories. Like the Juka who now cremated their dead, everything else was ashes.

Yet the corpses of their machines remained, buried inside the rocky earth. Like bones were the metal beams that shored the walls of this rust-haunted cavern. The Way Master shuddered at an unwelcome thought, that she was an insect creeping through the cavities of a dead body. Nor did she imagine that she and her companions were the only vermin here. The Overlords had spawned animate things that still haunted Logosia. She expected them to defend their black lairs.

Clanging sounds echoed from distant parts of the caves. Then came the shouts of soldiers and the musical piping of Technocrat communication. Thulann gathered with the others. Montenegro held up his hands and whispered, "We have to keep searching. Unless they've found the 'salamander' that Barghast mentioned, we'll let the brigadesmen handle it."

Screams cut through the dusty air. They heard the far-away roar of great flames. The metallic clamor grew more frantic. Montenegro reached out to Fairfax. "Dammit! Give me Starfell. I'm going to help. Jatha, come with me."

The ranger handed him the sword and scabbard. "I think I prefer a bow anyway, if that thing is truly a walking oven."

Raveka shook her head. "Let Gabriel and Jatha go alone. The three of us need to continue searching."

"She's right," agreed the knight. "They probably know we're here now, so we've got to make the most of our time." He unsheathed Starfell a few inches and smiled at the black blade. "Well, old friend, we are together once more. Now we must avenge your lord and lady both."

The knight and the sorcerer vanished in the direction of the distant combat. Thulann regarded her two remaining companions and said, "The enemy will be watchful now. Montenegro gave us the last of his invisibility draughts. We must not use them until it is necessary. Let us hide from the Pact of Four, not from each other."

They continued for what seemed to be a very long distance. Thulann soon lost herself in the labyrinth of corners and intersections, but Sister Raveka had assured them that she would remember how to return to the surface. Periodically they stopped and listened to the darkness. The battle raged farther away now. Then Thulann heard the cadence of voices. The trio moved more quietly as they tracked the sound to a vertical shaft in the floor. A large pipeline filled most of the space. It was warm to the touch. The Way Master squeezed between the pipe and the wall and climbed down the shaft. Her companions followed above her.

They emerged through the ceiling of a large chamber,

the open space of which was tangled with pipes and chains. Spark lamps strewed crackling light over a series of deep pits in the floor. Inside each hole nestled a round tank or silo, fashioned of riveted metal. The tops were level with the ground. The room appeared to be a central storage facility with tunnels and conduits leading off in all directions.

In the center of the room, surrounded by lanterns, were three figures engaged in an animated discussion. One of them stood tall in a black, hooded robe. From her perch on a pipe near the ceiling, Thulann recognized the garments of a high-ranking member of the Order of Theorists. This would be Lector Sartorius. The Way Master felt a thrill of anticipation. Their plan might just work. Lounging on a horizontal beam near the Technocrat was the petite Meer warrior, Shavade of Arjun. And leaning against a steel pillar was a brawny figure in kinetic armor, his familiar Jukan face uncovered. Pikas of Enclave had a coin in his hand. It twirled nimbly through his fingers.

Thulann's body shot with tingles. A heat rose inside her. She conjured a soothing mantra in her mind, then swallowed her potion of invisibility. She searched for a route to the ground, thirty feet below. The others followed her, likewise invisible.

Shavade was in the process of advising Sartorius, "We have to leave here right now! If Khyber's men find us there may not be time to get out."

"I am aware of that, Shavade, but the salamander will not obey your commands. I must remain to instruct it to guard the ambassador. Then we shall see about removing her to a more secure location."

Pikas murmured, "Or we could just kill her."

Shavade laughed. "She's pacifistic, not suicidal. She would defend herself against murder. I'd like to see you try it."

"She is Chamberlain Kavah's hostage," said Sartorius, "and I shall not kill her without his consent."

"Then there's only one way to solve this," said Pikas. "You've got to attack Khyber from the surface to draw his men away from us here. There's no guarantee your automaton will stop them all, especially with Montenegro out there."

"I intend to do so, but I do not want to leave the ambassador unguarded."

"Leave her to us," said the Meer. "We'll lead Khyber's men off if they make it this far."

Pikas smirked. "I told you we needed to bring a full contingent of Janissars down here to guard the old witch."

Sartorius answered without emotion, "If we had, Khyber would have penetrated this place weeks ago. The more men one deploys, the less secure their mission becomes. Secrecy alone has brought us this far. Though I shall be interested to learn where Lector Gaff gets his intelligence. He has discovered us far too quickly." The Technocrat closed his tattooed eyelids for a moment. "Very well, I shall go to the surface and command the Janissars to attack from above. Then I shall return. Prepare the ambassador to move, in case it comes to that."

Shavade rolled off the beam and crouched beside the nearest pit. Thulann had the impression she was looking inside for something. The Way Master surmised that the ambassador must be locked in that particular silo. Then Lector Sartorius reached into the folds of his raiment and pulled out a black crystal. The old Juka thought quickly. He was about to escape. She wore her armor and weapons but had

brought no throwing knives to stop him from escaping. In another instant Sartorius would be gone.

Then a jangling sound chimed near the lector. A slender chain careened through the air and swatted the black crystal from Sartorius's hand. A figure appeared before the elder Technocrat. It was Sister Raveka in her own hood and robe, with a chain whip attached to her forearm. She had used the weapon to foil his departure. The sudden action had disrupted her invisibility.

Pikas grinned broadly as he stepped forward. "Well, it's the slippery little sister! I haven't seen you since Buccaneer's Den, though I understand you've kept your hands full."

Shavade plucked out the crystal fighting staff that was strapped to her back. "Pikas, introduce me to your friend."

Raveka raised her off hand, in which she held a loaded bolt thrower. "There's no need for formality. This shall only take a moment."

"Kill her," growled Lector Sartorius.

Pikas and Shavade sprang into action and Thulann followed immediately. As the Way Master traversed a dozen or so yards she saw Raveka fire her weapon at Pikas, who was the most dangerous target. The assassin feinted. He ducked underneath the whizzing bolt. Sartorius backed away while Shavade thrust her staff at a low angle to trip the Mathematician.

Then three *thumps* shot through the chamber. Shavade screeched and leapt backward. Lector Sartorius clutched his chest while Pikas crouched and scanned the room. Thulann saw an arrow protruding from each one's ribs. Over her shoulder, Fairfax squatted on a large pipeline and whisked another arrow into his bow. "Anyone for seconds?"

The Way Master stamped her foot to break her own invis-

ibility. She drew her sword as she materialized into view, mere yards from the assassin. "Leave Pikas to me," she hissed.

The man once called the Viper of Levanto plucked the arrow from his breastplate and faced her. Thulann saw Montenegro's pendant hanging around his neck. He unsheathed his sword and smirked, "You're going to strike me down? And I thought you said you were beginning to respect me." His blade snapped with electric power in an arc that connected the scabbard and the swordtip. The air vibrated with its power.

"You are irredeemable, assassin," she muttered, "and I am going to kill you now."

Sister Raveka watched Shavade leap across pipes and beams to reach Fairfax, who slowed her down with a barrage of arrows. Lector Sartorius, then, remained alone with the Mathematician. The older Technocrat wheezed as he held onto the arrow stuck in his chest. Blood drooled on his chin. She coiled her chain whip at her feet, then popped out the retractable talons along its length. In a low voice she said, "Betray the Techno-Prophet and earn the consequences, Your Excellency."

"Silence," said the lector, then dropped a small sphere on the ground. It emitted a series of violent clicks and then exploded, tossing Raveka onto her back. A cloud of black smoke gushed around her. She heard the lector's footsteps as he fled. With a grunt she rose and pursued him, winding the chain whip on a reel on her forearm.

Then from the thick smoke emerged the blare of a horn. Raveka listened as she chased Sartorius. From somewhere deep in the tunnels came an answer, harsh

and metallic; but she dared not stop to consider what it was.

The salamander vomited a spray of molten rock at Montenegro, but the enchantment on his shield held fast. He deflected the lava and smashed Starfell against the automaton's pneumatic leg. The steel mechanism screamed and spat. But another burst of lava drove the knight backward from the sheer heat. He knelt for a moment to catch his breath.

A good twenty brigadesmen were fighting the mechanical creature and so far the battle seemed even. The thing itself was terrible to behold. Montenegro had expected something shaped like a lizard, but the salamander more resembled an enormous metal insect. It walked on many segmented legs. Its long thorax was a white-hot tank of magma. Through a nozzle it spewed gouts of the liquefied rock that scorched every soldier it hit. Their only wizard, Jatha, kept busy healing the injured brigadesmen. Montenegro and the others occupied the monster by rushing in, striking its spindly limbs and then fleeing before it could spray them. Already two of its half-dozen legs twitched with wounded malfunction.

The knight prepared to move in again. Unless the salamander changed its tactics he was confident they could finish it, though the time required might prove exhausting. He only hoped that Thulann and the others had managed to find the ambassador or the Pact of Four. Otherwise this would be wasted effort.

He sidestepped a pool of smoking magma as he charged forward. The salamander had turned the other way and so he landed three solid blows on one of its rear legs. It whirled

around quickly to attack him. The violent action wrenched the damaged leg and caused the creature to stumble. Montenegro dove aside as the automaton clanged on the ground. Its searing-hot magma tank melted the floor panel where it fell. But just as quickly the creature was on its feet again and Montenegro ducked behind his shield.

From elsewhere in the tunnels came the blare of a horn. Without pausing, the salamander lunged past its attackers to follow the sound. It barked a harsh, metallic noise in response. Its glow receded down the corridor. Then a bolt of lightning streamed toward the creature. Jatha blasted it in the thorax, which smoked and groaned but did not rupture. Montenegro led Khyber's brigadesmen in swift pursuit. The salamander turned a corner far ahead and vanished.

Montenegro cursed the creature's speed, which was astonishing even with its damaged legs. Wherever it was going it would arrive long before they did. He hoped it would not make the difference in the mission.

Every time Thulann's sword clashed with Pikas's, a blinding electric stream linked the two blades. His arc weapon lashed at hers even from several feet off. The Way Master felt the metal of her blade weakening. The battle was furious, a clash of two master swordsmen throwing strikes and parries as fast as the eye could follow. Yet the inevitable shift in momentum came when Thulann's sword cracked. Her next parry shattered the expensive steel. She somersaulted backward and whisked out two short swords.

Pikas laughed raucously. "You're slowing down, old hag! I always thought you'd be more threatening in a stand-up fight. Well, keep pulling out those weapons. I'll get through them all eventually."

She disregarded his taunts. She was in no mood for games. Though anger interfered with her concentration, she flung herself at him with rage in her throat. Turlogan fought beside her, of course, her tall, phantom ally.

Her twin swords flurried around the assassin, clanging wildly against his arc weapon, trading the electric stream back and forth between them. She thrust snap kicks into his gut and drove him back. Once, then twice, she hacked his sword arm. A drizzle of blood sprang from beneath his armor. In turn Pikas bellowed his own fury and renewed his attacks. One of her short swords chipped apart in seconds. He smashed his blade against her shoulder and the arc stung her fiercely. She struck his sword to bring the arc back to her weapon and away from her flesh. But the action doomed the second blade. It burst into smoking shards. Unarmed she tumbled backward again and assumed a guarded stance.

Both combatants fought for breath. Her shoulder heated with pooling blood. Pikas clutched his arm where she had chopped it open. Panting, Thulann gazed at the pendant that dangled around his neck, the crest of Montenegro that he had worn when he murdered Turlogan. She saw the golden heart clutched by a dragon's claw. A spike of anger rose inside her.

On the other side of the room Fairfax was running away from Shavade the Huntress. The ranger's arrows were nearly spent and the Meer had not slowed down. Thulann feared his chances were dim.

She held no more weapons and Pikas was closing in. He hurled more insults but she did not hear them. To Turlogan she silently called *I shall die for you* and then straightened to a posture for unarmed combat. She knew she had little chance of beating the assassin when he wielded the arc sword, but

the calm of a Way Master overtook her once more. All that remained now was to fight well until the end.

Then she saw the Montenegro crest again. She realized what she must do.

When he flung out his blade she caught it in her gloved hand. Instantly the electric charge seared her flesh, but she clung fast to the steel and threw a high kick. Pikas blocked it with his arm. She kicked again and struck his chin. He staggered backward. The sword pulled from her grip but she advanced with her hand upraised, keeping the arc attached to her palm. Her arm was nearly numb as she fell upon him with a hurricane of kicks and punches. He struck out with his sword but always she kept that one hand in its path. When her glove caught fire she ignored the pain and landed three fast kicks to his neck. He toppled over and rolled again to his feet. She dropped and struck his knee. Something in his leg broke. He howled and swung down the arc sword and its edge hacked through her glove and through her flesh and severed most of the fingers; and still she kept her hand close to the weapon, drawing off its terrible electric sting. Pikas stumbled on his injured leg. She leapt into the air and spun, connecting her boot with the side of his head and slamming him to the ground. Then she scissored her legs around his throat and began to squeeze. He crashed the arc sword against her chest. She swatted it aside with her ruined hand. Her old body was in agony but she felt him grow weaker. She had lost her hand but Pikas was falling.

She had used Montenegro's style of combat, in which the Virtue of Sacrifice lent the decisive advantage. Turlogan would be amused at the nature of her vengeance.

Then Fairfax shouted, "Thulann, look out!" When she glanced up, a seething monster loomed above her. The giant

mechanical insect thrust out a nozzle from what might be a face and unleashed a spray of white-hot, molten rock in her direction. She yelped and tumbled aside. The lava thudded behind her, catching Pikas in its searing ooze. Barely sensate, the assassin shrieked and clambered for safety. Thulann used her maimed hand as best she could to scale a cluster of pipes, until she stood well above the automaton. It was Barghast's salamander, of course. Lector Sartorius must have summoned it with the horn that he had blared. The creature seemed to be looking for him as it lurched around on broken legs, but the Technocrat had fled moments earlier. Sister Raveka had chased him. Thulann did not know if the Mathematician could find Sartorius, or what would happen if she did; but just then the Way Master was more concerned with the matter at hand. The salamander looked up and swiveled its smoking nozzle at her. Thulann prepared for further acrobatics, though she did not know how much more she had in her.

Shadows flailed around Raveka as she rushed down the machine-encrusted tunnel. The blast from Sartorius's smoke bomb had shattered her miner's monocle. She had grabbed a spark lantern and charged after him, though he now had the advantage. He could see the glow of her lantern, but she could not see him. His footsteps clattered ahead of her, though, easy enough to follow. His lead was dwindling. If he kept fleeing, she would catch him. If he stopped and concealed himself, however, he might well escape.

The corridor was lined with pipes and canisters that emitted liquid sounds. These particular machines were apparently functional; but she could spare no attention for them. She was gaining on Sartorius. When she followed him

around a corner she faced a dead end. Blackthorn's Chosen was trapped between her and the far wall. When the Theorist realized his situation, he rose to his full, proud height and turned to face her.

The sight of his hooked nose and dour frown startled Raveka. She shivered reflexively. Lector Sartorius had held the position of the Chosen for as long as she could remember. She had grown up in awe of his somber presence. Now she faced an icon and a moment of hesitation took hold. Then the voice of Blackthorn himself rose from her memory, chanting litanies to soothe and focus her. She shaped her expression into the icy scowl of a Mathematician.

Sartorius's eyes were lit by the low angle of the lantern. They were cold as iron. His monocle gleamed. "There is no point to this. Gaff has lost."

"He has not," said Raveka with an even tone. "He controls the ancient defenses above us. He will sweep away your troops if they do not follow him."

"That is absurd. Gaff's machines rely on the magma pumps in these lower levels. I have disabled them."

She almost flinched. "Then we shall repair them."

"You cannot. Only I know how."

"You're bluffing. Lector Braun sides with us. You cannot know more than he."

"Can't I? Sister Raveka, I know more than Gaff or Braun can conceive. As the Chosen I have seen wonders that amaze Blackthorn himself."

She watched his hands carefully. She saw his fingers moving when he thought she could not. "That is irrelevant," she uttered as she released the catch on her chain whip. The links of her weapon streamed onto the ground in a neat spiral.

Sartorius flinched, then composed himself. "Sister, I need you to tell me something. As a Mathematician you know the importance of discipline and logic. How then can a man like Blackthorn be our Techno-Prophet? You have met him. You know he is insane. He has neither discipline nor logic. Do you believe he is an adequate leader for Logosia? A suitable figurehead of the very Machine itself?"

Raveka blinked slowly. "That is irrelevant."

"Logos needs sane Technocrats in charge of the Orders. We cannot continue to languish under the rule of a madman. Blackthorn is a victim of Chaos, a slave of the flesh, driven mad by his organic parts. Logos requires Order, Sister. Logos is Order."

In her mind she yelled at him *Logos is the Machine, you old fool! The Machine is not Order, it is the synthesis of flesh and metal, of Order and Chaos! Blackthorn's humanity makes him mad but it also gives him compassion, something of which you know nothing!* She wanted to cry out all of these thoughts, but her training dictated a frozen countenance. She gave nothing of herself to him. Her fingers curled around the control handle of her chain whip. "That is irrelevant," she said.

He scowled, "Sister! I am your prisoner. Stay your weapon. Yours is not the authority to judge me. Only Blackthorn himself can do so."

She exhaled a long, measured breath. "He already has, Your Excellency. He told Lector Gaff about this place. It is as good as an execution order."

The Theorist looked taken aback, though the effect was subtle. "I see. Then that is where Gaff has received his intelligence. I am surprised, though I am not defeated." Abruptly his hand shot outward. As Raveka lashed her whip at him

she noticed the bolt thrower in his grip. She heard its *clack* and time stood still. The missile was no doubt poisoned. She saw the whip coil around his neck as she waited for the bolt to strike.

The spark lantern crashed. The tunnel went dark. He had shot out the light in hopes of escape. But she felt a tug on the whip and she knew she had him caught. With a twist of the handle she snapped out the whip's talons. In the blackness Sartorius gurgled and choked. She heard him fall to the ground. The chain tugged and thrashed, but with decreasing strength. In less than a minute it did not move at all.

She followed the chain to his body. Then she knelt atop his chest, pressing out what little life might remain. She stayed there for a while to convince herself that she had succeeded. Her concentration faltered with the magnitude of the deed. Her hands began to shake. To still herself she conjured Blackthorn's voice once more, which carried away her fears in a deep, glorious drone of sound. She opened her lips and chanted with the Techno-Prophet and the world became at peace.

Thulann soared through the air as she leapt away from another spout of magma. She landed inches ahead of the white-hot stream. Smoke curled from her back. The salamander was chasing her around the large room like a fixed artillery piece. Its aim was maddeningly precise. She did not have time to pause for a breath. Judging from the size of its thorax the creature might continue the barrage for a long time yet. Retreat was her only viable option. She glanced about for an exit when she spotted Fairfax's predicament. The ranger's bow was broken on the ground. Shavade the Huntress attacked him with her staff. He was trying to

escape but Thulann saw the futility of it. Fairfax would be unconscious in seconds, if not dead. Quickly she plotted a course to retrieve him.

Then a voice shouted, "Shavade! Get the ambassador! We're leaving!" Thulann looked to the center of the room. Pikas had recovered himself enough to stand. He was struggling to lift his arc sword. In his off hand was a rod made of black crystal, of the sort that might ensure his escape.

Thulann cursed and thought of rushing him, but the salamander kept her at bay. The assassin remained behind the huge automaton. She took it as evidence of the gravity of his injuries.

Shavade left Fairfax, who was struggling to his feet. She somersaulted to Pikas's side and knelt on the silo that contained Ambassador Adhayah. She spun a large wheel valve and opened a trapdoor in the top of the silo. At that moment Pikas raised his arc sword overhead. With a sinister grin he said to Shavade, "This is for letting Bahrok get away with that blind strike!" He crashed the sword into a weak spot on the salamander's thorax. Shavade let out a scream as molten lava broke loose from the metal tank and cascaded toward her.

A blur streaked behind Pikas. Glowing lava flooded the pit and curtains of smoke and steam rose into the air. But Shavade lay safely beside the deadly flow. Fairfax the ranger had snatched her from the fiery doom. He leaned shakily on his side and looked at the startled Meer. "The crazy deeds we do for love, eh?"

Shavade smiled back at him. "You're sweet," she murmured, then snatched a crystal dagger from her belt and rammed it under his jaw. The flaxen-haired ranger popped his eyes open wide and clawed at his throat. Thulann

howled and rushed toward them. Then thunder cracked the air as a streak of lightning pounded Shavade in the chest. She tossed away from Fairfax and landed in a smoking pile. When she started to rise a second blast sprawled her onto the ground.

Jatha of Ishpur stood in the entrance of a side tunnel. With a cry he ran toward Fairfax, followed by Montenegro and a crowd of brigadesmen.

The salamander protested its injury with a metallic squeal. It whirled to attack Pikas, who vanished in a cascade of sparkles. The creature's molten contents had drained into the pit and so when it turned upon Thulann again, its nozzle spat only steam. Without magma it was no fiercer than a juggernaut. The Way Master retrieved Shavade's crystal war staff and faced the creature with Montenegro and the brigadesmen at her side. They fell upon the monster, ducking around its massive legs as they bashed its exposed mechanics. One by one they disabled its limbs. The mechanical beast attempted to stagger away, but collapsed a dozen yards from the tunnel entrance it sought. It was not dead but neither was it a further threat.

Thulann indulged in a moment to collect her strength. Her ruined hand seared with pain. She swallowed a healing potion. Of course it did not restore her missing fingers, but the pain did fade to a dull throb. Then she lifted Shavade's crystal staff and ran in the direction that Raveka had chased Sartorius.

Montenegro called after her, "Where's the ambassador?"

Grimly the Way Master pointed to the seething pit of lava that had drained from the salamander. Montenegro paled. When Thulann hurried past Jatha, she saw that his healing spells had not wakened the bloody Fairfax. The wiz-

ard sat cradling his lifeless friend, silent sobs shaking his body.

In the darkness Raveka fumbled about for Sartorius's monocle. When she nestled it into her eye socket, the tunnel became visible in crude sepia. She hoisted the lector's body onto her shoulder and struggled to her feet, hoping that the battle outside had gone as well as her own.

When she looked up, an eye stared back at her from inches away. She flinched backward. When she looked again, she realized what she was seeing. A long, glass tube was bolted among the mechanisms on the wall. Inside was a transparent liquid in which floated a single eyeball. She furrowed her brow and examined the strange machine of which it was a part. More clear tubes and canisters lined the walls, bubbling with thick fluids. Some of the conduits were shielded with vents. Others seemed open in places, oozing wispy fumes. As she broadened her view she got a sense of many small, fidgeting movements. Shapeless objects—perhaps scraps of fabric or globs of denser liquids—traveled through the series of tubes, carried by bubbles or some internal flow. The sight of the machine chilled her. She shifted the weight of Sartorius on her shoulder and started to walk away from it.

The clear tube continued down the tunnel, beside her path. The eyeball was floating along its length, peering at her as she walked. When she stopped, the eye stopped as well, rolling gently but always staring.

A shudder coursed through her. She began to walk faster when she noticed more eyes inside other tubes and canisters, gazing blankly when she passed. The entire tunnel seemed filled with animation as if the machinery was awakening to

her presence. Metal shutters snapped open and amorphous blobs swam inside. They were scraps not of fabric but of organic tissue, somehow animated in their alchemical bath. A strange buzz arose in her ears, like the rattle of vibrating glass. It came in crisp, distinct pulses like the cadence of speech. Vents exhaled sweet fumes across her face. Tiny gears whirled and chattered. The collection of these mechanical events blanketed the walls like a chittering swarm.

Raveka broke into a run, her skin crawling with unfettered revulsion. Then something sprang in front of her. It looked like a humanoid skull, or most of one, with steel, spidery legs protruding under the cranium. The weightless thing fanned its sharp legs and latched onto her chest. She screamed and knocked it off, then sprinted as fast as she could manage with her burden. She did not know how far she had come down this tunnel, but she knew she had to leave as soon as possible. This place was a living nightmare. She did not want to conjecture why Sartorius had come this way.

When Thulann heard Raveka's scream, she charged down the corridor. The Technocrat ran into view carrying the limp form of Sartorius. Thulann saw that the girl was frightened but healthy. She allowed Raveka to pass and assumed a combat stance. "Are you being followed?"

The Technocrat answered, "No."

Only then did the Way Master notice the animated walls. She took in the grotesque sight and backed away with rising disgust. When she realized what she was seeing, her gut wrenched. This was a catacomb of the Overlords, the answer to Shirron Narah's riddle, "The tombs of the Over-

lords are empty." The Jukas' ancient masters had no bodies to entomb. Rather their flesh was strewn throughout their machines so that all semblance of rational life had vanished. They had become the machines in which they dwelled. The Overlords *were* the tomb. This was the master the Juka had served, the tyrant they had rejected.

Thulann hurried out of that terrible corridor. She vowed never to speak of what she had seen.

When she reached the large chamber again, she witnessed a dazzling scene. From the glowing pit of lava emerged a sphere of white light. Within it stood a very old Meer in the gem-studded gown of a Matriarch. Ambassador Adhayah rose unscathed from the burning fluid. On slippered feet she alit beside Jatha. The Meer wizard pleaded to her with glistening eyes. The Matriarch reached down and touched the fallen Fairfax on the brow. A silent flash erased the room for an instant. When it was over, the ranger stirred.

The ambassador met eyes with Thulann. The aged Meer's gaze was somber and alert. The Way Master nodded in acknowledgment. Then the Matriarch raised her arm and a streak of light fell upon Thulann. The old Juka startled. Then she lifted her maimed hand to discover that the fingers were restored.

From where he knelt, Jatha murmured, "Thank you, Venerable Grandmother."

"Take me back to my chambers," said the old wizardess. "I must dream to my sisters."

When they emerged from the tunnels into the murky Junction air, the horns and whistles of the airships bellowed a grim song. Thulann had fought the Technocrats enough to understand snippets of their army's musical language. The airships were announcing the arrival of the enemy. One of

the Juka clans was gathering outside the city's steel walls. Within days the others would join them, twenty-five thousand strong or more, as well as the teeming forces from New Britannia. The war was not over yet, though she prayed to the Great Mother that by felling Sartorius they had struck the killing blow.

Interlude

“**M**y troublesome Lector Gaff, I promised I would kill you the next time I saw you. Kneel, please.”

“Your Eminence, I have important news. Your Chosen, Lector Sartorius, is slain.”

“I said kneel!”

“Please, Your Eminence. The city is in crisis. The enemy troops are arriving by the thousands and we have no Chosen to lead us.”

“Bow your head. That’s good. So you caught up to Sartorius, did you? I thought you might.”

“I humbly owe it to Your Eminence’s counsel.”

“Yes, you do. And I suppose you want to be my new Chosen. Is that what you want, Gaff?”

“I shall serve you in whatever office you desire.”

“I’m not in a humor for cats and mice. Tell me, what will you do if I make you my Chosen?”

“I shall surrender to the enemy, Your Eminence.”

“Interesting. You would hand over Logosia to wizards and barbarians?”

"No. I shall allow them to enter Junction as they please and negotiate some compensation for their trouble. This is preferable to a devastating battle. It is better that we lose resources than lose lives. In any case we shall retain sovereignty and Logos shall not be touched."

"Sartorius would have called you weak."

"Sartorius wanted to kill you. His mind was not rational."

"Surrender is dangerous. What if the enemy decides to attack us once we have invited them inside our defenses?"

"Then we shall have a battle unlike anything since the Cataclysm."

"I should almost like to see that."

"As you say, Your Eminence. There is one other matter."

"The nexus point within my tower."

"Why, yes, Your Eminence. You are aware that Chamberlain Kavah wishes to reach it?"

"It's a delightful bauble. I see things in it sometimes, when I look."

"What things?"

"Wisps. I've always been intrigued by them, since I was a boy. Did you know the wisps had their own Cataclysm, just like ours? A lot of them are trapped in the Ether. But they have heroes, too, just as we do."

"As you say, Your Eminence. I humbly request that you make certain the nexus point is secure. I am led to believe there is great danger if Kavah reaches it."

"He shall have to get past me, Gaff. Do you think he can?"

"No."

"And what shall I do with you, my troublesome Gaff? Do I kill you or make you my Chosen? Or perhaps both?"

"I should be honored to become your Chosen, Techno-Prophet."

"Of course you would. Very well, Lector Gaff. Tell the others that you are Blackthorn's Chosen. I am interested to see what you will do with the remains of Sartorius's war. And Gaff?"

"Yes, Your Eminence?"

"I shall kill you someday, like I killed Sartorius."

"It shall be my greatest honor, Your Eminence."

14

Maelstrom

And a day came when Sir Lazaro found his young wife sobbing. He asked her the matter and in return she asked of him, "Will you always serve the King?" and he answered, "I would die for the King." And then she asked, "Will you always serve the Virtues?" and he answered, "I would die for the Virtues." "Will you always serve me?" "I would die for you." "Will you someday serve our children?" "I shall die for our children."

"Very well," said she, "then I shall tell you my secret. I am under a curse. Though my form is mortal my spirit is immortal. I shall never die, but neither shall I bear you children."

And Sir Lazaro said, "Then I shall search the world for an answer to this curse, for though I do not wish to see you die, to live without children at your breast would be the greater evil."

And thus did Sir Lazaro undertake the most terrible quest of his life, which the Virtue of Honesty laid before him.

In the haze of a crowded Junction street, Montenegro sat astride his mechanical horse. He wore the black kinetic armor that had served him well in Khyber's Brigade. A static-charged shield rested at his side. Its surface was painted with

his family's coat of arms. Under his elbow was tucked a new helmet that Brother Barghast had forged, with his knight's crest adorning the top. The longsword Starfell hung from his belt.

Sister Raveka stood beside him in her Mathematician's paint and robe. The cowl of her raiment concealed her face from onlookers. For this reason she gifted him with a warm smile. "Good luck. I wish I could come with you."

"Why don't you? Climb up here."

"I dare not. Someone might recognize me. Don't worry, everything should go smoothly. His Excellency has made the necessary calculations."

The knight stared deeply into her feather-shaped eyes. "There's only one calculation you need to make, my darling: How to say good-bye to Logos. No matter what happens today, we'll be going home to Cove soon."

She blinked and almost reached for his hand, but refrained for the sake of propriety. "Please, Gabriel. Not now."

"Soon." He nudged a control stud on his equestrian machine. The ebony creature walked forward, leaving the Mathematician behind. He donned his black, crested helmet. From a soldier he accepted the long, black shaft of a knight's lance, which Barghast had also constructed at his request. He held the weapon upright. Then he quickened his horse's pace and trotted toward the city gates. Behind him, riding unadorned ridgebacks, followed a contingent of hooded Technocrats from all three Orders. The streets were jammed with citizens and refugees who watched with fear as the mounted delegation set forth.

Montenegro eyed the city's defenses as he rode past each layer. The original boundary was defined by many large factory complexes. While the facilities continued to operate

during the crisis, they were thick with Technocrat platoons. Ballistas and lightning cannons had been fixed to the outer walls.

Beyond the factories stretched a zone of open desert that ended at the huge steel wall encircling the city. More divisions of Technocrat warriors and elite Janissars waited here, as well as a vast formation of juggernauts and dreadnoughts. Here also was the larger artillery consisting of pneumatic trebuchets, flame hurlers and spring-operated catapults.

Then Montenegro trotted through the massive, sliding gate of the wall itself. No battering ram would ever bring it down. At that moment he knew the Juka Clans could not hope to take the city without the aid of New Britannian sorcerers.

Outside the walls lay the bulk of the Technocrat forces, both cavalry and infantry. And in the smoky sky above, between the earth and hulking Logos, hovered dozens of ominous airships with furnaces aflame in their bellies. Such was the state of the Logosian military as Montenegro rode among them that morning, looking like one of them himself.

When he was past the troops he activated his mount's steel wings, which spread out dramatically to either side. He swept them up and aftward, forming barriers to protect his flanks as he continued trotting on. He heard the hushed reaction of the invaders as he did so.

Filling the view ahead of him were the collected forces of Garron and New Britannia. Countless thousands of Jukan warriors arrayed under their fluttering banners. He recognized Clan Varang as the leadmost army. Kumar, Savan and many others followed. Siege towers and huge, wooden artillery machines rose above the ranks.

The New Britannians stood beside their Jukan allies, in formations that were very different but no less impressive. Most striking of all were the Knights of the Silver Serpent on steel-clad horseback, their plate mail agleam even in the dingy light of Junction. A thousand of the armored riders watched from atop their restless warhorses.

Montenegro saw many of his erstwhile companions pointing out the crest that he wore. When he was nearer to them he removed his helmet, to eliminate any doubt of who he was. A shocked murmur rippled throughout the New Britannian formations.

Ahead of him was a lane that divided the two, great armies. In the center stood a wheeled platform that contained the highest officers of both forces. Montenegro made out Bahrok and General Nathaniel as well as Lord Gideon, Warlord Venduss and several others.

His face hardened. As he led the Technocrat contingent forward, he lowered his lance until it was horizontal. Stuck to the end of it was a severed human head, covered with mathematical tattoos. Lector Sartorius gaped at the invaders when Montenegro arrived to greet them. The knight gazed directly into the eyes of Bahrok and Nathaniel. The two men subdued their alarm, though Montenegro relished it.

"The villain Sartorius is dead," he announced. "Lector Gaff of the Mathematicians is now Blackthorn's Chosen, speaking with the voice of the Techno-Prophet. On his behalf and for the glory of New Britannia, I bring you an offer of surrender."

Bahrok crossed his arms and snapped, "What need do we have for surrender? We shall take what we want with or without Blackthorn's complicity."

"Look behind me. You see the army you face. There is no

need to sacrifice so many lives, theirs and yours, when Logos has already conceded the war. I have brought these worthy Technocrats to negotiate the details of surrender. Take the offer, General. Warlord. It is the honorable end to this conflict."

Bahrok growled, "Address me as Shirron, you cur!"

Near to him on the platform Venduss grumbled, "He has it correct, Warlord. There is no Shirron without the Great Tournament."

"Gentlemen," said Lord Gideon, "Honor demands that we listen to their offer. Let us accept these negotiators and consider their terms. General Nathaniel?"

The plate-armored general grimaced at Sartorius's severed head. With a gruff sigh he answered, "Lord Gideon speaks true. We must hear their offer. With Sartorius dead, the nature of the war changes."

Warlord Bahrok sneered, "Very well! Bring them forward. But you, Montenegro, are not welcome in our presence."

"Don't worry, Warlord. Your presence is not a place I enjoy. Our personal affairs shall wait until after the surrender is finalized, which is all the more reason to stop dawdling, wouldn't you say?"

The Juka grinned darkly. "One defeat at a time, human, or you may overreach."

Thulann indulged in a trance to assess the condition of her aged body. She bore no wounds after the Matriarch's healing, though her old joints complained of the drills she had practiced for two days. She would not stop preparing herself, pain or not. She intended to remain sharp. The death of Sartorius was a great victory, but it was not necessarily the final one. Greater opponents might require her attention. And Pikas of Enclave remained at large.

She sat on the metal floor of an unadorned room inside the Techno-Prophet's tower. Lector Gaff had brought her here to safeguard the nexus point, located somewhere deeper within Blackthorn's private chambers. She joined the tower's own Janissar guards as well as the ranger Fairfax, who crouched in the corner fashioning arrows. Both he and Thulann glanced up when a tall figure stomped into the room. Dressed in his wilderness leathers, Jatha of Ishpur looked perturbed.

Fairfax chuckled to himself. "So where is the ambassador, O mighty Patriarch?"

"Where else? Talking! She's dreaming to the other Matriarchs and as usual, they're going to continue talking while their enemies run amok. We're on our own against Kavah, I fear."

The ranger shrugged. "So much for rousing them to action. And people accuse you and me of sloth. How about Shavade? What's happened to her?"

"She's going back to Ishpur for punishment. I do not envy her future."

"Alas, heavenly Huntress. At least I succeeded in winning her smile."

The Meer laughed without humor. "Winning it? She smiled because she'd stuck a knife in your throat!"

"She called me 'sweet.' "

"Have you never met sarcasm before? And I took you for an intelligent man, from your refined and hygienic character."

Fairfax grinned and combed his bushy hair with his fingers. "What about Sister Raveka? I haven't seen that bitter blackberry today."

"She's with Lector Gaff, calculating geometric permutations or some such, no doubt."

"I still say I should turn her over my knee for what she did to us in Cove."

Jatha shook his head. "You have no instinct for self-preservation, do you? Leave women alone for a while, Fairfax. They've amply proven which is the weaker sex."

"There is no courage without weakness."

Thulann opened her eye and grumbled, "Why not demonstrate the courage to rest your lips for a while? You may need all that energy later, if Kavah tries to get at the nexus point."

The ranger smiled. "Ah, Way Master Thulann returns to the land of the conscious! But Kavah won't dare come here, though. Not with Blackthorn wary of the danger." He wrapped his fist around a bundle of arrow shafts and tapped the ends on the ground. "We ought to be down there with the armies. I saw a company of rangers with whom I'd dearly love to share my latest escapades."

The Juka unfolded from her trance position and stretched. "No, Montenegro was correct to go alone. We have no guarantee that Kavah will not come, nor that Blackthorn will be lucid enough to attend the problem, if you believe Gaff's assessment. Stay alert, my friends. The battle is not yet over."

"Or we can follow the Matriarchs' strategy," muttered Jatha, "and continue to sit here and chat." He plopped down on a metal bench and removed his shoulder bag, then began to sort the components of his spells in anticipation of the call to battle.

Montenegro was surrounded by an ocean of silvery armor. He walked through a crowd of New Britannian knights who watched him with a mixture of wonder and dis-

approval. He could not fault their surprise. His black kinetic armor gleamed in wicked contrast to theirs, and of course his death had been announced almost two months earlier. He must have seemed like a devilish apparition. But there would be time ahead to pave the rough spots on the return to his homeland. For the moment Lord Gideon was his primary reconnection. He strolled now beside the nobleman on the parched ground outside of Junction.

"You astound me, Sir Gabriel," the lord was saying. "Two months ago I thought you were a traitor or a dupe. Now you have delivered Sartorius's head on a lance and Logos's surrender in your pocket. I am forced to confess, I'm glad you did not let me throw you into prison. We would have missed the astonishing sight of you on that steel horse. Naturally we must address your actions in a proper court of law, but after this morning I daresay you will be forgiven your lesser transgressions."

Montenegro pursed his lips. "I do not want to be forgiven for anything. I stand ready to face any punishment the Royal Senate deems appropriate. But we should not get ahead of ourselves. It is still early in the day. How fared the negotiations?"

"I don't know the final terms. Bahrok and Nathaniel agreed to them in private. But the surrender is accepted and the documents have been sent back to Lector Gaff. When the horns blow, we shall enter Junction."

The black-haired knight smirked. "How did you convince the archmages?"

"There was no point to involving them in the discussion. In their eyes this place is one tremendous abomination. They would just as soon level it as walk through that gate."

"There are times I might agree with them, but let us be fair. The humans here are our cousins. They've forgotten our code of ethics, but they have not forgotten the ethics themselves. Like us they have their rotten grapes but on the whole the vine is healthy."

"I still don't like their grotesque half-machines."

"Neither do I, by any means. I cannot wait to leave this place and never return. But they don't like New Britannia's less pleasant denizens, either. We each endure what we must."

"Endure is the proper word. I won't mind returning home with this army so we can stop enduring the trolls and start eradicating them. They're on the move worse than ever now."

Montenegro nodded. "I'll have to dig my estate out from orc droppings when I get back."

"I hope you might join us for the larger campaign. But listen, Sir Gabriel, you remind me of an issue that's occupied far too much of my thoughts lately. I need your confidential honesty."

"You shall have it, of course."

The nobleman lowered his voice. His expression shifted nervously. "It concerns your cousin, Lady Aria."

"Go on."

"I don't know how to say this except directly, so here it is. I shall ask her to marry me when I return to Britain. But I don't know how she might take the proposal. You and she were close before your premature demise, so perhaps you can give me some insight?"

Montenegro chuckled and glanced away. "Ah, even the mightiest trees bow to the winds of love."

Gideon laughed. "Indeed."

"As you well know, my lord, Aria is an independent soul. No matter what I say or think, she will do what she will do."

"Yes, but what's your opinion? I can use some guidance. Will she marry a man like myself? Do you think she is the sort to marry at all?"

Montenegro looked up at the mechanical hulk of Logos. "We shall have to see, my lord."

A loud, raspy tone sounded over the Junction wall. The knights watched the tall, steel gates as they slid open with a rattling clamor. Gideon and Montenegro exchanged a glance. The nobleman said, "In we go," as the younger knight turned away. Montenegro jogged beside his black steed, which had collected a tangle of curious knights. He mounted it with a single leap. He activated a brisk canter and headed for the gates himself.

A column of Varang cavalry reached the opening first. By the dozens they trotted into Junction, eyed warily by the Technocrat troops on the ramparts. Montenegro stopped to observe the clansmen stream inside. The procession seemed orderly. He knew the negotiators would only have agreed to the surrender with assurances that the occupation force would conduct themselves in a civil manner. Bahrok's distorted sense of honor made the arrangement work.

He looked straight up. According to the terms of surrender, the airships were beginning to pull away. The spectacle was impressive. Nearly fifty hovering, steel towers fanned outward in all directions, dispersing from a dense cloud into a broad, spotted canopy overhead.

Jukan horns sounded a victorious fanfare. The officers' wheeled platform rolled toward the gates of Junction with Warlord Bahrok standing proudly at the top, alone and arrogant, a many-pointed spear in his hand.

Montenegro turned away in disgust. Bahrok would have his moment of glory, but Gabriel did not have to watch it. The Juka would get his reward soon enough. Patience was Montenegro's weapon now.

Another horn sounded. This one was Technocrat. He looked back to see a tuft of smoke rising from inside the wall. The war trumpets of Clan Varang called out a charge and all at once the Jukan warriors poured into the city. Flashes of lightning erupted from the steel parapets. Bahrok's artillery began to lob spark stones deep into the Technocrat complex. The Logosian troops cried out in anger and the great armies arrayed on the desert began to stir into action.

"Dammit!" bellowed Montenegro as he activated his horse's levitant engine. The automaton lifted him to the height of the wall and gave him a better vantage. Clan Varang was flooding through the gates, spearheaded by their ridgeback cavalry. The wall-mounted lightning cannons and flame belchers scoured the outermost ranks of the Juka, but the sheer number of clansmen overwhelmed the Janissars inside. At the same moment great phalanxes of New Britannian infantry rushed toward the Logosian troops on the open ground. Sheets of arrows flooded the sky. The Technocrats lit their smoke cauldrons and moments later a tide of opaque clouds rushed across the battlefield. A symphony of blats and whistles directed the Logosians in the gloom. War engines began to flare and flash; fire and lightning ripped through the densely formed invaders. Montenegro heard the screams of his countrymen.

Then the brickwork stacks of Junction coughed out torrents of black cauldron smoke that washed across the city in a mighty swell. The concealment would aid in Junction's

defense. The steel walls brimmed with leaping plumes. The high gate poured thick clouds like a spout, even as it rattled closed again. The thunderous war drums of the Technocrat army crashed out a beat that echoed from distant mountains. Overhead the airships began to moan and toot an alien conversation and descend with eerie, deliberate calm.

Montenegro squeezed the grip of his lance. This was Bahrok's treachery, of course. It would be his last. The black knight spread his horse's wings and soared down to find the Jukan villain. A clearing appeared in the midst of the smoke. A group of spellcasters had created a broad whirlwind that repelled the thick clouds. Warlord Bahrok stood in the center on his platform. Montenegro lowered his lance and streaked toward him.

But the warriors of Clan Varang launched a wave of arrows to intercept him. He wheeled to the side and tipped up the automaton's mechanical wings. The missiles clanked against the armored feathers. He grimaced. A direct assault would be suicidal now that the wizards and archers were in play. He veered away from the clearing in the smoke, plunged inside the dark cloud and alit on the cracked, dry ground.

From his belt he produced a miner's monocle that he fixed to a stud on his helmet. The device did not penetrate the smoke but it gave him clearer vision than the Varang clansmen had. With his black garb and mount he was nearly invisible to them. He churned the levitant engine at a very low speed, just enough to glide without touching the ground. The horse's lashing, serpentine tail was enough to propel them forward. With lance and wings upraised to make his profile slender, he headed in Bahrok's direction.

Those Juka who challenged him fell quickly to Starfell's blade.

He soon arrived at a clearing of circular winds that held back the opaque cloud. Montenegro touched down just within the wall of thick smoke. He gazed into the windy clearing at what he mistakenly thought would be Bahrok's rolling dais, but was actually the entourage of General Nathaniel. The older knight, estranged from his order, glittered on horseback in a fine suit of plate mail. He was surrounded by a handful of other, loyal knights as well as a collection of foot soldiers, messengers and a pair of mounted spellcasters. The group was moving at a slow pace toward the city. Nathaniel was busy listening to reports and sending out commands.

Montenegro's body tingled with fury. From the quick deployment of the New Britannian troops, he knew that the general had been privy to Bahrok's treachery. It would be Nathaniel's last mistake, as well. He trotted his mechanical steed in the path of the entourage and waited for the gusting winds to reach him.

The roiling smoke pulled away from Montenegro in pale, wispy strands. He materialized from the haze like a phantom astride his black, mechanical warhorse. The automaton's wings tilted backward, its serpentine tail lashing the air. The knight glowered through his crested helmet. His dark armor glinted at distant flashes of lightning. With slow precision he aimed his barbed lance and nudged the clockwork steed forward.

The mounted general startled at the outlandish vision before him. Quickly his expression turned to rage as he snapped down the visor of his great helm and took up his own lance. Sorcerous enchantments glittered across his sil-

very plate mail. His tall, white horse stomped anxiously. When he lunged into a charge, Montenegro engaged his machine to gallop. Sparks crashed from iron hooves. The two men hurtled toward one another and the smoke-plumed battlefield seemed to dissolve around them.

In his mind Montenegro cried, *Grandfather, I do this for Honor!*

Moments before they clashed he flipped a switch on his lance. A pneumatic mechanism shoved out the tip by three more feet. He struck Nathaniel first. The end of his lance punctured the general's armor, but still Nathaniel's spear bashed his shield like a hammer. He felt himself lifted from the saddle, falling backward. Quickly he leaned against one of the wings and prevented himself from unhorsing. He dropped his damaged lance. Then he reared his clockwork mount and spun around.

General Nathaniel was rising from the ground. His arm hung limply, blood rushing from a hole in his steel shoulder piece. Montenegro leapt forward to charge again but a bolt of lightning streaked at him. He ducked behind a wing. The bolt crashed against the machine and the gears inside complained. He frowned. Lightning was particularly effective against Technocrat mechanisms. He himself was the first New Britannian to discover that fact.

The wizard's attack had been designed to allow Nathaniel to regain his warhorse. The general's arm had apparently been healed, as well. He hefted a large mace and galloped toward Montenegro. The black knight pulled Starfell loose and charged. They passed with a great *clang* of colliding weapons. Then they closed. Each man's weapon battered the other's shield. Their mounts circled. Montenegro was at a disadvantage, having to actively steer his clockwork horse

as well as fight; but he compensated by activating the levitant engine. With a leap his mount sprang up high, granting him the benefit of a loftier position. A steel wing rushed past the general's head, forcing him to duck. Montenegro kicked out his boot and bashed Nathaniel from his saddle again.

A barrage of lightning crashed into his horse and his kinetic armor. He hissed in pain and reared the machine to conceal himself behind its body. When General Nathaniel mounted his warhorse a third time, Montenegro shouted, "Enough!" He fainted twice with Starfell and jammed the sword into the general's side. Then he steered his horse upward and carried Nathaniel into the sky.

The general gasped for breath as he clung to the sword that impaled him. They soared a hundred feet above the battlefield, which roared and flashed under its blanket of smoke. Through bloody lips Nathaniel choked, "Why? Why oppose me? I'm fighting for our victory!"

The black knight spoke with deliberate enunciation: "Because victory without Honor offends me, General. And because you crossed a Montenegro and it must be answered."

Then he jerked the sword back. Nathaniel shrieked as he fell into the dense, billowing cloud. Montenegro knew the odds were low they would find the body in time for resurrection. He blew out a heavy breath.

Around him the conflict escalated. The airships had lowered to battle altitude, which was the same height he was flying, and commenced raining fire and steel missiles on the enemy below. Steam horns blared on all sides of the knight. By the glow of the furnaces inside the vessels he could see crews of engineers toiling fiercely.

A deafening sound bellowed near him. His flying steed

lurched, nearly unseating him. He regained control of the steering vanes and leveled off, allowing him to watch as a gigantic pillar of rushing wind and dust roared past. The airships that it struck bent and tumbled. The funnel cloud swooped around for another pass through the flying armada. Montenegro dove out of the way. He stared down the length of the whirlwind to the battlefield, where an archmage was slinging it like an enormous whip. He presumed this was Mistress Aurora's work, though he could not make out the spellcaster's identity.

A swarm of airships floated nearer. They pounded the archmage with a storm of lightning and fire. The funnel cloud leapt again from the smoke and knocked down another aircraft. Montenegro dodged debris slinging past him at high speed. He thought it prudent to move away from the area.

Elsewhere the airships were devastating both the Jukan and New Britannian lines. Though smoke obscured the battle near the walls of Junction, farther out he could see masses of invaders falling back or outright fleeing. The Jukan artillery was reduced to flaming timbers. The cavalry of both armies frequently rushed from the smoke to regroup. Montenegro knew exactly why. Blackthorn's automatons had rumbled onto the open plains. A platoon of juggernauts and a handful of dreadnoughts were a match for almost any number of soldiers. Only the Knights of the Silver Serpent had the skill to meet them and Montenegro noticed, with some surprise, that Lord Gideon had not entered the fray.

The entire tableau seized him with rising anguish. Even if the invaders triumphed, the cost would be terrible. This bloodshed was completely unnecessary, a product of the

Pact of Four's lust for power. He thrust out his jaw with grim determination. The Pact was only two now. He was halfway finished.

When he scanned the battle, smirched with black fog, he could not see Bahrok at all. He decided the warlord could wait. Chamberlain Kavah would be lurking around Blackthorn's tower now. The time had come to join Thulann and the others.

Then the sky shrieked and split open.

From a giant gash in the air tumbled a blast of hot wind, followed by many blurs of color. As huge shapes approached on great, fanning wings Montenegro's mouth dropped open. The archmages had just cast the largest summoning spell he had ever seen. A dozen or more dragons, seventy feet long, roared fire as they swept atop the hovering airships. Each great serpent was as big as one of the vessels. Their shield-size talons latched onto the black machines and ripped open their armor in seconds. Long necks reared back and flared like cobras as they belched tumbling waves of golden flame. The airships moved far too slowly to engage the terrible monsters. Soon the sky fleet of Blackthorn was half awash with fire.

Montenegro flew toward Logos as quickly as he could. He presumed the dragons would attack anything in the air and he had no desire to be a target. His fear was confirmed when one of the massive beasts swiveled to face him. With a stroke of its wings it rocketed forward. He jerked the reins to careen aside as the monster's gigantic body stormed past. The wind alone caused his clockwork steed to tumble. He leaned against the horse's neck and regained control. Then he ducked near a burning airship and hid inside the billowing smoke, using the plume for conceal-

ment as he followed a path to the edge of the floating city. Logos was built upon a skeleton of great, riveted beams. He rose toward an exposed girder where he could rest and gauge his options.

But a monstrous growl shook the air behind him. The dragon had tracked his escape. It thundered upward. He streaked among the exterior girders of Logos, searching for an escape. He plunged into a small hollow defined by a metal floor and riveted walls. His mechanical horse nearly touched the ceiling and he had to dismount to fit inside. To his dismay, there was no exit at the other end. Then the light dimmed. A giant head blocked the entrance to the hollow. Raptor-like eyes stared at him with fierce hunger. The dragon's snout was larger than a canopied bed, its slavering teeth as long as swords. He drew Starfell with a steely ring and faced down the monster, though he knew his end was at hand. Not even Sir Lazaro could have met a dragon this large, one-on-one.

Dammit, Grandfather, this is not the monster I want to fight!

Dust swirled around him suddenly. He realized the dragon was exhaling. With a shout he dove for cover as the beast's fiery breath smashed into the hollow and the air itself turned to flame.

Inside Blackthorn's hovering tower, Thulann rushed forward when Sister Raveka entered the room. The Way Master demanded, "What is happening in Junction? Why do I hear a battle? I thought the truce had been signed!"

The Mathematician had abandoned her stoic temperament. Her painted face registered panic. "Bahrok attacked when his troops entered the city! It's a bloodbath down there on both sides!"

The old Juka clenched her fists in the air. "Damn him and all of his ancestors! His madness has no end!"

Fairfax slung his bow across his chest. "That's it. I'm going down there."

"No, look!" cried Raveka as she ran to the nearest wall. She turned a crank to open a set of metal shutters. Outside the window lay the cityscape of Logos, a bleak accretion of somber buildings and soot-black factories and huge, cryptic machinery. The smokestacks had begun to gush flames. The machines churned with increasing speed. The entire city shook with a swelling rumble, as if giant gears had begun to turn in the deeps of the ancient citadel.

Thulann uttered, "Great Mother, it is the Cataclysm again."

Raveka pointed into the air. A shape hovered there, small by comparison to the vast mechanical cityscape. It could have been called an automaton, except that such creatures had the appearance of practical design, displaying evidence of symmetry and function. The thing outside the tower was a conflict of man and machine, a horrid, parasitic adhesion of metal upon flesh, a human being whose body was half-swallowed by riveted steel. It had a portion of a human head. In place of one arm hung a heavy steel claw that flexed absently. From its misshapen body draped a cloak and tunic, as if it had forgotten that it was no longer a man.

Thulann watched in horror as the Techno-Prophet Blackthorn glided away from his tower, heading for the edge of the city. All around him the machine called Logos whirled into strident, grinding activity.

Sister Raveka moaned, "Lector Gaff tried to convince him to stay, but His Eminence wouldn't listen!"

"Then we're not going anywhere," grumbled Jatha of Ish-

pur, gazing at his companions. "Kavah's plan is working and we've got to be ready for anything."

The walls shook with what sounded like an explosion, somewhere high in the tower. They heard guards crying out in alarm. Thulann clutched the hilt of her sword and murmured, "I have but one question. Is Kavah ready for us?"

As an agonizing inferno devoured his body, Montenegro bit down on several glass vials he had shoved into his mouth. The healing potions drained down his throat. He felt with torment the battle between dragon's fire and the Water Magic. His skin burned away beneath his armor and healed itself again in torturous cycles. He screamed in the depths of the blaze.

Then it was over. The air became white smoke. He coughed and rose from behind the glowing slag that moments before had been his mechanical horse. Wispy fumes rose from his kinetic armor. His shield lay in ruins. He heard the grumble of the dragon's breath as it sniffed at him.

He had drunk the last of his healing potions. He would not get another reprieve. He gritted his teeth, whisked Starfell to bear and sprang at the monster's gigantic head. Its lips curled back from scimitar fangs but he lunged faster than it could react. With a perfect thrust he shoved the enchanted sword deep into the dragon's huge eye. The beast yelped and began to withdraw its face from the hollow, but Montenegro tumbled over its snout and slashed his blade across the other eye. Then he rolled backward into a crouch. The blinded giant reared back its head and pawed its face with confusion. As it inhaled once more, Montenegro decided to retreat. He cast one last glance over the gear-driven machine that had

shielded him from the brunt of the flames. "Ride free, Humbolt," he whispered, then scrambled quickly out of the hollow.

He climbed up a framework of girders and struts toward the lip of the city. High winds shoved at him. His hands began to sweat. Below him the dragon clung to the steel beams and blew another gout of flame into the hollow. Montenegro flattened against a metal panel to evade the incidental ball of smoke and fire that billowed past him. The heat scorched his face through the eyeslit of his helmet. Then he scaled the girders once more, as the sightless dragon roared its displeasure and beat its mighty wings to sail away from the battle.

Montenegro secured handholds and gazed down at embattled Junction, a thousand feet below. The city and most of the land around it still lurked under a blanket of cauldron smoke. A portion of the steel wall succumbed to a ferocious onslaught of lightning and fire, he presumed from one or more archmagies. But the momentum of the battle belonged to the Technocrats. Again and again did the invading troops pull back from the opaque war cloud. Artillery machines inside Junction flung balls of flame and spark stones toward the unengaged segments of the Jukan and New Britannian armies. Even Lord Gideon's knights seemed to be involved now, as Montenegro could not see them. The airships, though contested by wizards and dragons, still struck at the ground troops with their myriad flashing, booming, clattering weapons. And presently a metallic shriek cut through the air. From the shroud of smoke that obscured the city rose many tall, mechanical arms or tendrils. Like gigantic swans' necks they arched above the black cloud. Then their steel jaws flung open and hurled white and

yellow sprays of magma into the air. Where the fountains rained on invading troops, devastation followed. Even the dragons were halted by the clinging barrage thrown from the magma spouts. The huge beasts yowled in pain as lava stuck to their scales. The accumulated weight quickly dragged the monsters into the cauldron smoke, where Montenegro heard automaton companies tearing the dragons to pieces.

He turned away with fury in his eyes. The magma spouts were the very war machines that he had secured with Khyber's Brigade. His intent had been to leverage their power against Sartorius's troops and to deter Bahrok and Nathaniel from attacking. Now the machines were slaughtering New Britannians by the dozens. Montenegro snarled at his own tears and climbed toward the streets of Logos with increased determination. *I have acted with Virtue, Grandfather! How can I have gone so wrong?*

Thunder rolled across the desert. Montenegro pulled himself over a railing and onto a platform at the edge of the lofty city, then caught his breath and looked down. The sound came again, booming and cracking. He could not locate a source, though he noticed dark fissures traveling across parts of the desert floor. Abruptly the dry ground seemed to lurch underneath the Jukan formations. Soldiers crowded together as broad chunks of the earth rose into the air. Montenegro gaped. The New Britannian archmages had literally torn up the desert surface and were lifting the pieces toward Logos itself. Within seconds a throng of clansmen would pour into the hovering city.

He looked behind him. Janissar troops were hurrying to repel the invaders, but he wondered if they could man the perimeter quickly enough. Clearly they were unprepared for

intruders. Most of the Technocrat soldiers were fighting below. No one had imagined that the height of Logos could be scaled so easily.

The city itself clamored with activity, flame spouts blowing brightly, huge gears spinning frantically. The floor shook beneath him. Logos was enraged.

Then he saw, atop one of the rising islands of desert sand, the wheeled platform that carried Warlord Bahrok. The Jukan leader stood amidst a hundred of his personal guards. He raised up his spear as if leading a charge, though he could do no more than wait for his island to carry him to the city.

That is the dragon I want to slay! Aloud he hissed, "Bahrok, you shall continue to reckon with me until one of us lies dead." Then he gauged where the warlord would land and sprinted in that direction.

The creature in front of Thulann was a cousin of the dune gazers of Jukaran, though its spidery legs were longer and it had just one, gigantic eye. It darted nimbly through the air, blocking the corridor to Blackthorn's chambers. The Way Master feinted a charge. The gazer spat a ball of fire. Thulann dove underneath its trajectory, rolled across the floor and stroked her curved sword across the monster's face. It bellowed in pain. She struck twice more. The gazer wheeled around to flee and she drove her blade into its spherical body. It thumped heavily onto the ground.

Footsteps rushed behind her. She saw Jatha and Fairfax hurrying up the corridor. "Where's Sister Raveka?" she asked.

Fairfax said, "She went with Gaff to follow Blackthorn.

Forget about her. There's more oculuses coming from that way! They're pushing back the guards."

She wiped her blade and asked, "Are these Kavah's creatures?"

"They are his swarm," sighed the ranger.

Jatha added, "He'll use them to harry the opposition while he does his dirty work. If we can get past them, we'll be able to touch the chamberlain himself."

"Then let us start touching," said Thulann as she led them farther into Blackthorn's chambers.

15

Cataclysm

And Sir Lazaro searched the world for a remedy to his wife's curse. No island was too distant nor pit too black for him to explore on his quest. But neither scholar nor wizard nor hidden scroll could reveal the secret cure. At last he fell to his knees before the Shrine of Spirituality. There he studied his own soul to find the weakness that caused him to fail.

As he did so a man approached him and said, "You seek the remedy for your wife's curse."

And Sir Lazaro said, "Lord Blackthorn! I did not know you were in Skara Brae."

"I have waited here for you," said the knight-wizard, "because I knew the day would come when you would search your own soul for the answer. Only now have you proved yourself worthy to find it. You must go to the depths of the caverns of Destard and destroy the Cauldron of Kwan Li. Then shall the curse be lifted and your wife bear you children."

And on that day did the Virtue of Spirituality give Sir Lazaro the answer that he sought.

On the smoky streets of Logos, Montenegro rounded a corner and saw Warlord Bahrok plant his boots onto the

metal-plated ground. A throng of fierce Janissars battled the warlord's guardsmen, but the knight did not foresee the defenders resisting for very long. Already Bahrok was tearing through them with hellish fury, impaling Janissars with his forked spear and hurling them like hay through the air. Montenegro had never seen Bahrok in group combat before. The sight was genuinely formidable.

He pondered how best to face the Juka. He had tried the direct approach and failed. For an instant Raveka's words visited him: *We cannot meet every challenge face-to-face. What good have we accomplished if we lose?* Khyber's strength, of course, had come from ambush. If Montenegro struck from hiding, he could throw one or two disabling blows before Bahrok might respond. The scales would tip in his favor. He would have to contend with the guardsmen, but Blackthorn's Janissars would keep them busy long enough for him to finish the job.

Instinctively he reached for his pendant, before he realized it was not there. Bahrok, of course, had given it to Pikas. He shook his head. *No. I am not an assassin. Victory without Honor is not worthy of a Montenegro. There's only one way to do this.* He prepared to step into the street and confront Bahrok with a challenge, as he had done with General Nathaniel.

Then a metallic sound made him flinch. He whirled around to see a dreadnought rushing at him from behind. Its huge, steel arm was extended and its claw was flared for attack. He jumped aside and brandished Starfell; but the automaton floated past him without stopping. He exhaled from relief. He was wearing Technocrat armor, so the creature did not recognize him as an enemy. Instead it charged into the middle of the melee on the street. The Janissars formed around the mechanical creature while the chieftain's

guards fell back into a defensive stance. Warlord Bahrok himself remained in the thick of the fighting. His enormous spear slammed the dreadnought again and again. It pounded him back, but Jukan healers had repaired the damage even before he regained his feet.

Abruptly another shape descended into view. Montenegro could not identify the automaton, though its cloak and peculiar shape seemed somehow familiar. When a flame spout blazed high on an adjacent building, the amber glow erased the smoky shadows and sent a chill through the knight's bones. The automaton had half of a human face, which Montenegro recognized. He had seen paintings of Lord Blackthorn from before the Cataclysm. This machine-clad nightmare was the Techno-Prophet himself. His grotesque mechanical form matched Raveka's description, though Montenegro had not anticipated the tyrant's loathsome aura of sickness. Blackthorn was just as abominable as the archmages predicted.

The Techno-Prophet waved aside the Janissars and the dreadnought. When he glided among the Varang clansmen they set upon him with as much ferocity as Montenegro had ever seen. Bahrok recognized his opponent, as well, and commanded his elite troops to attack with their full might. For an instant Blackthorn vanished in a sea of burly warriors and flinging polearms. Then his head raised above the mob. The Jukas' blows did not appear to concern him. He flashed a terrifying claw and began to rip through the invaders as if they were cobwebs. Two dozen had fallen before the guardsmen retreated. Bahrok stood tall among his men, bellowing insults at his foe.

Then Blackthorn rushed forward. His claw snapped around Bahrok's waist and lifted him overhead. The war-

lord's taunts cut short. Blackthorn whisked backward to where the dreadnought idled. He handed the struggling Juka to the automaton. Montenegro picked out the words, "Take him to my Chosen for sentencing," in a voice at once sonorous and harshly mechanical. The dreadnought soared away with Warlord Bahrok in its arm as Blackthorn confronted the clansmen again, who were pushing through the remaining Janissars. His claw shut with a shrill crash. "Let us continue. It has been too long since I've heard the screams of unfamiliar voices."

Sixty elite Varang warriors charged at Blackthorn. Montenegro thought they might survive a few minutes, if they fought well.

But his concern was Bahrok and Kavah, not the Techno-Prophet. He hurried away from the staggering carnage and raced for Blackthorn's tower, not far from the battle. The imposing structure floated above the streets of Logos, attached by a collection of heavy chains. A stair-stepped bridge reached up to the atrium. As he mounted the steps he heard the sounds of combat ahead. Inside the front gate his boots slipped on a bloody floor. He caught his balance and surveyed the situation. The large atrium was a dour place, tall and shadowy, draped with chains to retract the bridge and lush with steam venting from other parts of the building. The floor was busy with the corpses of gazers and Janissars. Several passages led deeper into the tower. He followed the clang and flash of combat until he discovered a group of guards pinned down by the gazers' fireballs. They told him that Thulann, Jatha and Fairfax were beyond a door at the end of the smoky hallway. Montenegro borrowed one of their shields and led a charge against the gazers. He endured several nasty wounds on the assumption that Jatha would heal him when he reached the end. A few of the Janissars did not make it that far.

But eventually he fought past the oculus swarm and reached the interior door. On the other side, warned the guards, was one of Blackthorn's personal chambers. The Janissars seemed as daunted by the Techno-Prophet as the hostile gazers. Montenegro assured them that their master was not inside the building. They ran through the door and slammed it shut.

The room beyond was more grim than the atrium. It was completely unadorned except for a strange series of carvings that blanketed the armored walls. Montenegro saw that it was not skilled artwork. Instead it consisted of crude sketches, listless writing, mathematical equations, random doodles; all gouged into the heavy steel by some powerful tool. He remembered the Techno-Prophet's lethal claw and decided not to examine the carvings any further.

Rather the action inside the room demanded his attention. Jatha, Fairfax and Thulann knelt behind a crude wall of stone that Jatha must have conjured for protection. Several Janissar bodies strewed the floor, felled by sorcery. In the center of the room stood a Meer wizard shining with power, his colorful robe swirling about him. His hand stretched out toward a spinning funnel of blue lights. Montenegro recognized a beacon identical to the one that shone at Lord Valente's Wisp Hunt.

"Montenegro!" laughed Chamberlain Kavah. "You're just in time to see the end."

Fairfax lifted his bow over the lip of the stone barricade and fired an arrow at Kavah. The missile gleamed with some enchantment. It smashed against Kavah's hand and a brilliant light erupted. The Meer snarled and drew back, then hurled a torrent of lightning against his collected enemies. Montenegro dove behind Jatha's barricade. Some of the

Janissars were not fast enough. Jatha returned a stream of his own lightning, forcing the chamberlain to erect a shimmering wall to defend himself.

Thulann was rubbing at a singe in her sleeve. "Welcome to our stalemate. So far we have kept him from casting his spell on the nexus point, but we cannot do this much longer. We need to finish him."

Montenegro grinned. "Nathaniel is dead. Bahrok is in Gaff's hands. Our work is nearly finished."

The Way Master grabbed his arm. "Bahrok is in Gaff's hands? Where?"

"Outside."

She cursed under her breath. "I must go there."

"Why? Gaff will have his head on a pike by the time we're through with Kavah."

"That is my fear. Bahrok must face his crimes before a council of warlords."

He frowned. "He surrendered that right when he marched his army into Logos."

The old Juka shook her head. "This is not for his sake. It is for Turlogan."

Montenegro patted her shoulder. "Go. Take these guards with you. There's a hive of gazers outside the door who'll roast you like a duck." While she gathered herself he added, "Go with Virtue. May the Great Mother grant you victory, old woman."

"Live or die, I shall do my best, young pup."

Jatha tossed globes of fire to cover the Jukas' exit from the chamber. Then the wizard crouched beside his two companions. As he healed Montenegro's injuries he muttered, "She's right. We have to end this. He's stronger than I. I'm going to wear out long before he does."

The knight hefted his Janissar shield into position. "Enchant me with everything you've got. I'll rush him while you two keep him on the defensive."

Fairfax let out a laugh. "Some of us are drunkards. Others are heroes. I'm not sure who is the more foolish!"

Montenegro smirked as Jatha infused his body and equipment with magical force. His muscles felt wildly energetic. With a nod he sprang over the stone barricade and charged at the glowing form of Kavah.

Something flashed in front of him, a cascade of sparkles, and another man intercepted his attack. Pikas of Enclave bashed his arc sword against Montenegro's shield. The buzzing stream of electric charge found no purchase on the metal plates, however, rebuffed by Jatha's magic spell. Montenegro flung a torrent of sword blows at the assassin. Starfell clanged savagely against the arc sword. The black blade showed no evidence of damage from the electric assault. When the knight slashed a hole into Pikas's helmet, a trickle of blood emerged. The assassin backflipped and assumed a guard stance.

Fearsome spells and bewitched arrows flew back and forth around them, but the other combatants seemed thoroughly engaged. Pikas wiped at his blood and laughed, "Back to your old form, I see! Recovered from the shaming Bahrok gave you?"

Montenegro had no desire to talk. He faked a blow, batted the parry with his shield and jammed Starfell into Pikas's hip. The assassin roared with pain and lunged at him, flinging a high kick that battered Montenegro to the ground. The strapping Juka leapt atop the knight's shield and pinned him. One boot pressed Starfell against the floor. Through bloody lips Pikas cackled, "You're right where I used to be,

aren't you? You know you're a damn good warrior, but you still keep losing! One day you'll snap and realize that winning is the best Virtue of all."

The knight saw his family crest dangling from the assassin's neck. He bellowed with anger and tossed Pikas from atop the shield, then rammed the sharp corner into the Juka's gut. Pikas bashed the arc sword against Montenegro's helmet. The electric stream seared his face. He swatted at the arc with Starfell, drawing it off his helm. They each backed away.

"Look at you, Montenegro! From a knight to a Technocrat in two short months. You're one step from Khyber and two steps from me. Ruthless enough to win at any cost."

Montenegro growled at the assassin's words. In his mind he cried *It's a lie, Grandfather! You know it's a lie!* Then he barreled forward once more, his sword strokes becoming a hurricane of ever increasing force.

As Thulann dashed out of Blackthorn's tower, her sense of balance suddenly faltered. She stopped on the staircase drawbridge to regain her bearings, and then realized what was happening. Logos was a storm of activity, belching smoke and flame, clanging and clattering and rumbling to the very roots of its cyclopean machinery; and for just an instant, for one terrifying moment, the entire floating city had tilted in the sky. At the lip of the city Thulann saw why. A horde of Jukan warriors had streamed onto the metal-plated streets. When the city had listed downward, great clumps of soldiers had toppled off the edge.

The Way Master had to look twice to register the scene. Huge slabs of desert earth floated upward from Junction, carrying with them masses of Jukan clansmen. Meanwhile

numerous gigantic, crane-like arms had unfurled from the interior of Logos. The steel-frame tentacles swatted at the hovering slabs. When they hit their mark, the enchanted desert earth crumbled to pieces and countless soldiers plunged into the smoke of Junction. Blackthorn himself hovered in the air, directing the unearthly defense of his city.

Fireballs the size of tower trees roared up the perimeter of Logos. The heat caused the giant tentacles to bellow in metallic pain. Thulann knew the archmages were deploying the mightiest spells they had in their effort to conquer the impregnable Logos. The Techno-Prophet answered by rousing even more violent passion from his mechanical citadel. The pistons and furnaces of Logos rampaged with a thunderous din, great masses of steel smashing upon steel, geysering sparks and bursting smokestacks, until Thulann imagined a gear might crack and the whole city might fly to pieces. From the billows of smoke and rattling booms she knew terrible events were taking place on the battleground below, though she could not see what was happening. She could only imagine the terror and death that must have ruled the deserts of Junction.

The scope was too much for her to apprehend. Adjusting to the quake of the ground, she rushed down the steps on her original task, to locate the captured Bahrok. She had to ensure that the warlord traveled to Garron for trial. Turlogan needed proper justice and she would not fail him.

A wide courtyard stretched out from the base of Blackthorn's tower. To her relief she spotted Lector Gaff at the far end. Sister Raveka stood beside him, with a dozen Janissars and a large, repugnant dreadnought. Trapped in the automaton's segmented arms was Warlord Bahrok, struggling pointlessly, holding a defiant sneer on his face.

The clamor of Logos prevented Thulann from calling out. Instead she ran closer, until she realized that Raveka was pointing a bolt thrower at Bahrok. With the warlord restrained and so many soldiers on hand, the Way Master understood that the weapon was not for security. This was an execution. Quickly she ducked into the smoke and shadows of the closest building and crept near the two Mathematicians. Gaff and Raveka stood fifteen feet from the edge of the courtyard. Thulann crouched behind a pillar, drew her sword and listened to the conversation.

In his usual icy tone Lector Gaff was saying, "It is a courtesy, Warlord Bahrok, one for which you might perhaps be thankful. I shall ask you a final time, have you any last messages to deliver to your heirs?"

"I shall haunt this city!" snarled the bold chieftain of Clan Varang. "You shall never be rid of me!"

"I am not prone to superstition," said Gaff.

"I shall not be a ghost in your corridors, Technocrat, but in your history! I was the first to bring my troops to your streets! Not even Kumar himself did that!"

"You would never have survived the first week of your invasion without the treason of Lector Sartorius. Your people are primitive barbarians."

Bahrok's eyes flashed. "Behold this barbarian on your doorstep!"

Gaff sniffed arrogantly and glanced at Raveka. "Sister, is your weapon prepared?"

Thulann bunched up her muscles.

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"Very well. Farewell, Warlord Bahrok. Sister Raveka, kill him."

The Way Master hurled across the open space and thrust

out her sword. With one stroke she batted the missile as it emerged from the spring-powered weapon. A return stroke pressed her blade against Raveka's throat. "I shall thank you not to murder a clan chieftain, if you please."

Bahrok grinned and barked, "Thulann, you old pteranx!"

The Janissars lunged forward but Gaff stopped them with an upraised hand. "Way Master Thulann, what do you want?"

"Justice. Bahrok must return to Garron for trial."

"I see. And you would kill my servant over it?"

"Indeed I would." She gazed at Raveka, who shivered as the blade kissed her neck. "I have never liked you, Sister. You are a poor influence on Montenegro and he does not need more of those. Nor have I forgotten the nine bolts you shot into my stomach over Garron. I will have to reckon with the knight, alas, but that is the only remorse I shall feel if you convince me to slice open your throat."

Lector Gaff sighed. "Killing her shall not help Bahrok."

"But threatening her gains your attention, does it not? I ask for a simple truce, Lector Gaff. Stay the execution until the battle is done. We can negotiate his release. Otherwise you shall make a martyr of him."

The Lector folded his hands together. "What do you say, Sister Raveka?"

The hooded woman swallowed. "She speaks sensibly."

"Very well, Way Master Thulann. You have your truce."

Thulann pulled the sword from Raveka's throat and sheathed it in a single action. Warlord Bahrok howled a laugh. "You old witch, you never fail to bewilder me! But I never doubted where your loyalties lie."

She leaned close to him and bared her teeth. "My loyalty is to Garron and to Turlogan, not to you! You are a disgrace

to the clans and I intend to make you confess it before the council of warlords. You will never be Shirron, Bahrok!"

The muscular warrior grinned wider. "I am Shirron already! I have decreed it. Who will defy me?"

"I will."

"You cannot stop me, Thulann. History might squabble over how I did it, but nothing you do can erase the fact that I am in Logos at this moment. I may not have conquered it, but look how far I got. Look how far I got, Way Master!"

She snorted. "You may brag to the crows. When I am through with you no one shall announce you to Blessed Halls of Honor. Your corpse will rot, not burn."

Lector Gaff interjected, "Perhaps you might save this discussion for another time. Something seems to be happening."

The assembled group looked up at the sky. Directly overhead, amid swirls and pillows of smoke, appeared a disk of rich, scarlet color. Slowly the circle expanded until it covered the entire space above clamorous Logos. It was neither bright nor dark but a translucent phenomenon, like a heavenly veil encircling the city. When it continued to grow and drop below the city's edge, the thunder of the battle abruptly ceased. The furious machines of Logos began to pace their activity. The sky had turned a lush red, with clouds of smoke wafting gently beyond the veil.

Sister Raveka began to reload her bolt thrower, stammering, "Is this one of the archmages' spells?"

"I suspect," said Thulann, her heart pounding roughly, "that the Meer Matriarchs have decided to stop talking and start acting."

Montenegro's body throbbed with burns. Jatha's enchantments had faded and the electric charge of Pikas's

arc sword lashed through the steel kinetic mail. The wizard tossed him an infrequent healing spell but Chamberlain Kavah had stepped up his attacks. Jatha and Fairfax were now fighting a defensive battle, ducking behind the crumbling stone barricade to evade Kavah's fury. Montenegro was on his own.

But Pikas also bore his share of wounds. His kinetic armor was battered and cut. Springs hung broken from between the plates. Through it all the assassin never lost his mocking tone. At the finish of a brutal exchange he panted, "The general said you shot him in the back with a crossbow. How did that feel?"

"Be quiet," grumbled Montenegro.

Then a terrific blast tore through the far end of the room. When the smoke turned to haze, the knight saw that his two companions were down. His ire spiked. He glared at Kavah, who was reaching again for the swirling beacon. If he cast his spell on the nexus point, according to Jatha he might be strong enough even to hold off Blackthorn himself.

Pikas smirked, "It's a sham, isn't it? You and the Virtues? You're just pretending to be a knight. In your heart you know victory is all that matters, and the Virtues don't always let you win, do they?"

Montenegro frowned at the Juka. "The Virtues don't achieve victory. They *define* victory." He took two steps forward in an unexpected direction and thrust his sword at Chamberlain Kavah. He was aware of the cold, terrible exposure of his back to the assassin, but Starfell tore through the wizard's defensive spells and penetrated the flesh of Kavah's belly. Then Montenegro watched in amazement as the black weapon split into a thousand shards and released a brilliant light. It was a wisp, a glimmering, otherworldly

creature that Starfell was said once to have slain. The coruscating light forced the chamberlain to scream.

Abruptly Montenegro felt the scorch of Pikas's arc sword as it cracked through his back armor, shoved through his spine and plunged out from the center of his chest.

He dropped prone on the metal ground. He could not move. It was not pain he felt but extremes in temperature, burning in his torso and frost in his limbs. He witnessed via patterns of color on the wall a dazzling conflict of sorcery between Chamberlain Kavah and something unseen, something that pulsed and shifted and scintillated but made very little sound. The Meer howled, "It's the wisps! The damn wisps!"

And then the conflagration vanished. He could not sense the presence of wisps or spells or even the nexus beacon. The only light emitted from a vent high in the wall, painting wan stripes across the settling haze.

Pikas mumbled, "It's gone. Is it gone?"

"Yes, of course it's gone!" snapped Kavah.

"What happened?"

"There was a wisp in the sword. It captured the nexus and allowed others to come in."

"They destroyed it?"

"They closed it. The damned wisp was in the sword! How could they have known?"

"Who cares? I'm leaving this place. I've got one more score to settle."

"Help me up, Pikas."

"Shove it up your robe, Kavah." Pikas knelt down and pushed his face close to Montenegro's. He frowned bitterly. "I hope that's how you define victory, you bastard. I wanted to kill you fairly and you turned your back on me. You bas-

tard!" He spat in the knight's face. "Rot." As he pushed himself off the ground, Montenegro saw the gold pendant that remained around his neck. A pang lilted through the knight's gut. Then the room flashed for a moment with the scintillation of a black teleportation rod.

A loud *clang* rocked the chamber. He heard Kavah gasp and spring to his feet. Then came mechanical sounds, the whisper of greasy joints, the grind of a levitant propeller, the gurgle of fluid in a tank. The Meer staggered backward as something large glided in. Montenegro saw a bulky shadow on the wall, though he could hardly discern a man in it. Then a voice murmured, "Run, little mouse," in a tone that sounded as if it were spoken through a musical instrument.

Kavah vanished in another burst of flashing lights.

The air stirred. The stink of burnt oil drifted past in waves. Blackthorn moved closer to Montenegro, though the knight struggled simply to keep his eyes open. His body was dissolving, like melting ice. He wondered if Jatha might wake to heal him.

"I'm sorry it came to this, Sir Lazaro," said the Techno-Prophet with a soothing timbre. Montenegro heard the madness in his words. "I asked you to join me but you wanted to stay with the King, didn't you? I can't fault you, I suppose. You did give him an oath. I know how important it is for you to leave a Virtuous legacy. Don't worry. You know I regard your children as the closest thing I have to my own. If I can, I shall watch over them, and Lady Malgotha as well. She does need watching, too, doesn't she? A genuinely cantankerous woman. I warned you about marrying a dragon."

The words seeped into Montenegro's mind like a dream or a rising memory. He fought to place them among the tales of his grandfather. Blackthorn had known Sir Lazaro,

of course, but the Techno-Prophet was insane now, rambling nonsense. His mechanical tomb had stolen his reason.

Blackthorn continued, "I suppose that's all anyone really wants in the end, isn't it? To inspire their children. To make them proud. Did you know I can see the future, Sir Lazaro? No, I'm not mad. I'm a wizard. Yes, you must believe it, I truly can. I've seen your grandson. Yes, your son's son. The lad bears your name and your crest. He is proud of you. Quite proud. Rest easy on that. And I'll tell you a secret. Unlike you, my old friend, he shall deflect a Cataclysm in his time. Even you didn't do that, did you?"

The knight no longer heard his own breath. His heartbeats, which a moment earlier had drummed in his chest, were now trickling away. *By the Virtues*, he thought, *Jatha isn't going to reach me in time. Is Jatha dead, too?*

"Yes, of course you're proud of him, too. You're his grandfather. Don't make too much of a fuss, you old fool."

I shall miss the sight of Raveka in Cove. I believe that must be my only regret. Grandfather, was life this hard for you, as well?

"All right, then. Go on. I shall see you again in time."

The mechanical din of Logos subsided as the scarlet veil descended over the city. In bewilderment Thulann and the others stared in the direction of Blackthorn. The Techno-Prophet rose higher into the air. Before him appeared a half-circle of tall figures with gemstones glistening in their robes. They were hazy apparitions of the Meer Matriarchs. The Way Master guessed that Ambassador Adhayah had summoned them from Ishpur. Blackthorn was having a subdued conversation with them.

Then the Techno-Prophet turned away and glided back to his tower. The Matriarchs faded away. The clockworks of

Logos resumed their normal thrumming and the scarlet veil remained in place.

Sister Raveka lowered her bolt thrower. "The Meer have interfered. I believe it's to our favor."

The noises of the ground battle had disappeared.

From the dreadnought's arms Bahrok grumbled, "It is not over yet."

"But it is for you, you ugly gulbani!" cried a voice from a rooftop. Thulann looked up to see a haggard Pikas of Enclave. The assassin lifted a knife in his hand and flung it at Warlord Bahrok. The Way Master jumped forward to knock it aside. Her hand missed the pommel by inches. The knife thudded into Bahrok's arm and the warlord let out a terrified howl.

"That's for blindsiding me!" howled Pikas.

The dagger carried Logosian poison. The burly warlord writhed as his flesh began to wrinkle and split, his eyes shriveled, his powerful muscles pulling at bones until they cracked.

Thulann turned away. She knew there was nothing they could do for him, and that justice would never come for Turlogan.

She snorted. She could do nothing for Bahrok, but she could do something for herself. Without thinking she scrambled up a pillar to the rooftop. Pikas spat at her and whisked out a rod of black crystal.

With a *crack* the shard jumped from his hand. It landed at Thulann's feet. She stomped on it and the assassin darted away.

Sister Raveka stood in the courtyard with her bolt thrower upraised. She had shot the rod from his grip. She pointed in the direction he had fled and Thulann ran after him.

The Way Master kept pace as he leapt from roof to roof,

scrambling across lofty pipelines, dodging large, churning gears and vents that exhaled noxious fumes. Over the outlandish roofscape of Logos she chased him until the edge of the city appeared. He stopped at the end of a platform that looked down on the ground, a thousand feet below. The scarlet veil continued under the floating city. Thulann had the impression it was a sphere around them.

Pikas gasped for breath as he drew his arc sword and wheeled around to face her. "I killed Montenegro," he growled at her.

"Perhaps he shall recover," answered Thulann. "You shall not."

The assassin groaned as he shook his head. "No. I won't fight you anymore. I'm done with it. I can kill anyone in the world, but you were different, Way Master. I could have killed you in Crevasse, but I didn't. I wanted to beat you without tricks. I believed I was good enough, but I was wrong, huh? We fought face-to-face over the ambassador and you took me down."

She grumbled, "Ego suffers without Honor, and just as often suffers with it."

"Don't mock me! Montenegro mocked me to the last. He didn't give me the honest fight I wanted."

She stepped closer. "I am not moved to tears."

He sneered. "You don't have to be, old woman. I just wanted to say that before I go."

"You shall not go anywhere."

He grinned. "But I shall, because I refuse to die at anyone's hands but my own. Farewell, Way Master. Shed me a tear someday."

With astounding grace he performed a high backflip and hurtled off the edge of the floating city.

Thulann sprang after him. Logos vanished and a thousand feet of air separated them from the ground. She swatted her blade but he parried. Her second stroke landed true. Her sword passed through his neck and his head tumbled free with an expression of alarm. She grabbed his Jukan horns as she fell. With a painful *thump* she landed atop the airship that careened below them. Pikas's body bounced off a corner and continued to plummet to the desert below. She winced at the pain in her legs as she sat up, lifting the assassin's head. Something clattered on the metal panel where she sat. Gold glinted in the scarlet light. It was Montenegro's pendant. She picked it up, then rose to her full height and surveyed the vista below.

Through the Matriarchs' blood-red veil she saw the battlefield of Junction dispersing. The invading armies had pulled away from the city walls. Though she could not pick out many details from this height, she was horrified at the scope of the carnage that littered the open ground. Bodies carpeted the desert. The arid ground was cracked and gouged from the archmages' lifting spells. Giant black furrows had been raked by weapons she had not seen, except perhaps for their engines in Logos. Fallen airships blackened the fields. The steel wall surrounding Junction was bashed down in several places and ruined automatons smoldered around the gaps. The cauldron smoke had faded from the city itself, parts of which now burned. She saw the corpses of dragons twisted atop factories. The armies of Blackthorn huddled around the city and rested.

In decades past she had been one of Turlogan's generals. She well knew that this brief battle was costlier than any nation could afford. The lessons here would endure. The Pact of Four had arranged this conflict. Diligent work had

ended it before the carnage was even worse. Jatha's arguments to the Matriarchs had provided the finishing stroke, but they had all risked their lives for this conclusion. History needed to record that fact, as the lesson would surely be needed again.

While the airship on which she stood gently lifted her back up to Logos, Thulann rubbed her stiff neck and smiled. *Turlogan, I did my best. I shall continue to do so. You will have time to forgive me before I join you in the Halls of Honor, but you must not forget your old rainbow. For I shall certainly honor you. We did far too little of that in life, but it is not too late. It is never too late, my love.*

Sister Raveka knelt quickly when she entered Blackthorn's gloomy chamber. She cast her eyes to the ground to avoid the terrible gaze of the somber half-machine. Only then did she notice she was crouched in a pool of blood.

"Sister," came the Techno-Prophet's flawless voice, "I believe that you knew this Britannian."

She looked up to see a body lying prone on the floor. Montenegro's lifeless face was angled toward her. His grey eyes stared blankly at the wall. Her gasp erupted involuntarily. She felt a clawing, hollow sensation inside. In a detached way she was horrified by her own sobbing in the presence of the Techno-Prophet.

Lector Gaff stood near the doorway. His tone was particularly cool. "The ranger and the Meer wizard survived. We must deliver them to the New Britannian army. You shall do it, Sister Raveka, if you think you are able."

Blackthorn added, "You will be in no danger. The Matriarchs have mediated a new truce, without the benefit of Bahrok and Nathaniel. This one shall stand with the aid of

the Matriarchs' veil of protection. Though I suspect it was actually designed to contain a burgeoning Cataclysm."

Raveka barely heard what he said. She attempted to compose herself, but her litanies failed. The words fell apart on her lips. She mashed her eyelids shut. "Your Eminence, Your Excellency, please forgive me. I do not think I can go."

A sharp smell stung her nostrils. She opened her eyes again. Blackthorn was hovering directly in front of her, his human hand lain atop her cowed head. "My dear Sister, do not cry. We are all of the Machine, which is Eternity itself. See, you smudge your paint. Come, let the equations comfort you. They are a part of Eternity. They are a part of you, my beautiful child."

A heavy tear filled her eye and she blinked. Her vision turned red. It had not been a tear but a trickle of blood. Then pain rushed into her brow and she glanced up to see Blackthorn's claw gently cutting her flesh.

"Quiet, child. This is more fun if you resist the urge to scream."

But again, to her dismay, she could not obey the Techno-Prophet's wishes.

16

Ashes

Thulann removed her headdress as she exited the Hall of the Shirron. The nighttime sky over Garron seethed with a million stars, like embers blown by the crisp mountain wind. The firelight of the hall threw her shadow long. Her ornately embroidered gown rustled with every step.

Three people greeted her in the spiky garden outside. The smallest one pulled back her russet curls and grinned. "So you're still Regent Thulann, hey?" said Toria.

The Way Master heaved a sigh. "I proposed Warlord Ustenn for the third time but they will not hear of it. Apparently they are stricken by my girlish beauty." She shrugged. "The Great Tournament is only a month away. I suppose I shall endure my sentence until then."

"You're twice as competent as any warlord in that hall," said Jatha as he leaned against a pillar. "I say you are the correct person for the office and I also say that false modesty is bad for the complexion."

Fairfax swirled the wine in his cup and offered, "How about Venduss? He's a keen lad and easy on the ladies' eyes."

Besides, everyone loves him right now, the mighty war hero who so valiantly penetrated the black orifices of Junction to capture those magma spouts."

Toria frowned, "Hey, I found the bloody entrance!" and Fairfax mouthed the words as she spoke them.

Thulann smiled. "So you did, Toria. That was a fine piece of intelligence work. You could train to be an excellent spy-master in Venduss's service, if I can somehow convince you to stay."

The freckled girl shook her head. "Sorry, I've got some business to take care of in Britain. I also need to give Pikas's 'remains' to Bawdewyn, so he can settle his debt with Anzo. And anyway, Tekmhat wants me to send her some spices from Vesper. And Venduss . . ." She smiled. "Venduss needs time with his wife."

Jatha chuckled. "You're a Virtuous lass, Toria, despite what the Tarkosh guardsmen claim."

"You should come with us, little sister," said Fairfax, "after your chores are complete. Jatha and I are returning to Avenosh. There are wilds in that land that have languished without our calming presence for torturous millennia. Surely they would benefit from the intrusion of your brandywine voice."

The Meer flattened his ears. "Avenosh? We have made no such agreement, Fairfax."

"You did agree, did you not, to assist me in resuscitating my romantic enterprises?"

"I didn't mean I'd let you have another go at my sisters!"

Toria giggled and wrapped an arm around each man's waist. "We can discuss it as we sail to Britain. I may just be persuaded to travel in your company, if you can stifle your arguments for at least a few hours a day. I do need to sleep sometime, hey?"

Thulann unpinned her hair and let the many white braids fall loosely around her shoulders. "Ask not for miracles, child. Humility is the most neglected Virtue of all."

They laughed together and walked through the gardens of lofty Garron. The twin moons of Sosaria draped them in a silvery glow.

The vibrant New Britannian forest enveloped Toria with morning rain. Her senses filled with the battle of a thousand greens and browns, the hiss and patter of rain-drops on leaves, the tumult of brisk, organic odors that rose from the soggy earth. She stood before a mossy hill-side in which lay a sheltered hollow. Under the hanging shadow squatted a pedestal of carved stone. Atop it was a small icon, depicting a heart in the clutches of a reptilian claw. The mellow light of the morning shower antiqued the golden surface. Its gleam was guarded and subtle. Toria wrinkled her nose at the tingling scent of an active enchantment.

Montenegro's shrine had been built to serve Compassion, but she knew it honored all eight Virtues. The magic of the Dragon's Tear protected the niche from destruction by the marauding orcs. Toria, however, was not entirely safe from the savages who continued to stalk the forests around Cove, and so she wasted no more time. She knelt before the shrine, her bare legs cooled by the rain-soaked ground, and poured satiny words from her lips:

*"Time absolves the dragon's flame
And yet eternal shall he fly.
The passing of his thund'rous wing
Lends sparkle to the starry sky."*

Grunting voices sounded from the distance. Toria sighed and rose to her feet. She had expected the rain to hide her song from orcish ears. In any event she had to hurry along. She preferred to be alone for the moment. A company of knights would arrive soon to scour the woods of vermin. Many of the Silver Serpents had prioritized that task upon their return from Logosia, to honor their fallen comrade.

Toria had chosen a more private remembrance. The echoes of Montenegro still danced inside her, as well as other warriors she had left across the sea. The thought drew a smile to her face.

In case the orcs found her, she unbuckled the enchanted cutlass from her waist, shouldered the blade and scabbard and stepped lightly through the dripping forest. The way to Cove, where Bawdewyn had anchored, was long and wild. Anticipation brought a pleasant tune to her mouth, which she hummed as she proceeded around the rocky foot of a proud, ominous mountain of black stone.

The first snow in Logos that year was a luxurious shade of grey. It formed a metallic slurry in the riveted streets, painting marbled colors on the frosty surface. Sister Raveka strolled through the razor-edged wind with a cloak draped over her raiment. Her cowl deflected the biting cold from her face.

As she traversed a landscape of black machinery, a lilt of excitement tingled inside her. Winter often elicited that feeling. Since she was a child she had always taken the chill as a sign to regroup, to make plans, to prepare for the eventual coming of spring. She enjoyed the solitude of a Technocrat's hibernation, when she could spend more hours each day in

meditation and calculation. Winter was a time of intricate promise. And this one was more exciting than most.

She came upon a puddle of ice on the ground. When she glanced into the clouded reflection, a tattooed face looked back. Her sigh was bittersweet. To be inscribed by the Techno-Prophet was as great an honor as any Mathematician could desire, though the actual process had been less than enjoyable. Now Lector Gaff had begun her training for the rank of Mother in the Order. She had been given a second chance, which she knew she did not deserve. Despite her trespasses, her mentor asserted the highest regard for her talents. She was flattered by his confidence.

But of course his plans interfered with her own. The emerald hills of New Britannia still called to her from across the sea. Lady Aria was a phantom on those faraway shores, whom Raveka longed to give flesh again. The extra trouble would be bothersome, but she was proficient enough with a spy's cosmetics to conceal the tattoos on her face. Then she could set about finding sorcery to restore her pure, white skin. Lord Gideon would wonder where she had gone for several seasons, but she had an excuse that would more than suffice. Any story would, really. He had fallen for her completely. She could be his wife with no effort at all.

Her reflection in the ice revealed a round, swollen belly. The baby would arrive in the springtime. She would convince Gideon that she carried his child, and that this was the reason for her long absence. She would hide the truth. The child was Gabriel's. He had left her a final gift. She could only be happier if he had lived to see it.

Lector Gaff had commanded that she surrender the baby to the Order. Raveka was formulating a different plan. The offspring of Montenegro would be New Britannian. Gold

and satin would swaddle the baby. The wealthy society of Britain would be its playground. The child would learn to carry the shield and the lance of a Virtuous knight. It was the destiny of Montenegro blood and Raveka's fiercest wish.

The task would require the most stringent preparations. Gaff would not concede to her desires. To realize the dream she must extricate herself from Logos while leaving him powerless to fetch her back. Such conditions would be difficult to achieve. A tentative openness had developed between the two nations that would render Lady Aria more vulnerable to Technocrat scrutiny. But Gaff himself showed great confidence in her abilities. She gave herself hopeful odds of success. The most difficult months were those ahead of her now, the frigid winter nights during which she must calculate the details of the plan.

The challenge gave Raveka a unique thrill, like the knife edge of the icy wind. Of course she had a sharp edge of her own. She had carved her place in New Britannia once before. This time she would do it permanently. If Gaff or anyone else interfered, they might just find themselves carved, as well.

She imagined that the Lord Blackthorn of old, that Virtuous knight and wizard of legend, would approve of her valor.

Thulann leaned back in her tall, granite chair and waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. The voluminous sleeve of her Way Master's robe wafted in the action. Before her in the small room, three war masters bowed and turned to exit. They vanished in the muted light from the doorway. A soft spring breeze rolled in from beyond.

The old Juka rubbed a palm over her face. These generals

were becoming tedious. The fragments of Clan Varang were proving difficult for them to subdue. Even several years after his death, Bahrok's coalition of allied clans remained loosely committed to his treachery. They gave the other clans fits of political trouble. Shirron Ustenn and his loyal chieftains too often reacted with strength instead of craft. Sometimes Thulann had to chuckle. Generals were as lost as children when it came to diplomatic guile. She gave them advice on frequent occasions, like today, but only after they asked politely.

The best part of the arrangement, of course, was that she lived at her own home. She did not have to travel and she could dismiss her visitors whenever it suited her. The perks of being a respected elder had finally caught up to her.

Still, the schedule wore down her old body. Retirement had stolen the energy from her bones and muscles. Even the crisp spring winds were enough now to rouse the ache in her joints. Neither was her patience what it used to be. The tides of warfare yielded to other concerns.

A tall silhouette appeared in the doorway. Venduss wore full trousers and no shirt, the casual attire of a warrior chieftain. A slender braid lolled over his shoulder. He crossed his arms and leaned against the jamb. "You should keep your voice down. I can hear your groans from the yard."

Thulann laughed. "Bahrok once counseled me to speak louder on my own behalf. Perhaps his advice is sinking in at last."

"You saw his fate with your own eyes. Do you wish for the same?"

"He had it easy. He shriveled up in a matter of seconds. My demise has lingered for a decade and shows no sign of finishing. When I am a hundred you shall be draping me over this chair to squawk at visiting soldiers."

Venduss grinned. "I shall do my best to wear you down before then. There are two more war masters to see you."

She closed her eye and grimaced. "Send them away. I have nothing left for them."

"Not even a chieftain could send them away, I fear."

Her face brightened when two small children dashed into the room. Tarkosh and Torika, the son and daughter of Venduss and Tekmhat, nearly sprang into her lap before they remembered their manners. In their little warriors' clothes they bowed before her and said in unison, "Good day, Way Master."

She conjured a frown. "You say it is a good day? I shall not take your word for it, nurslings!" In a fluid motion she leapt from her seat and tumbled through the air above them. Her quick hands snatched their collars. When she landed, she carried a child on each shoulder. "You must escort an old woman outside and prove how good it is." Tarkosh and Torika giggled with delight.

Venduss shook his head. "So much for the decrepit old crone! What an act you play for the war masters. You are as decrepit as a sword fresh from the anvil."

She bumped him with her elbow as she passed. "I exert myself for very few causes and warfare is not among them. If I must deceive the generals to keep it that way, then so be it. I do not lie, but I feint in battle."

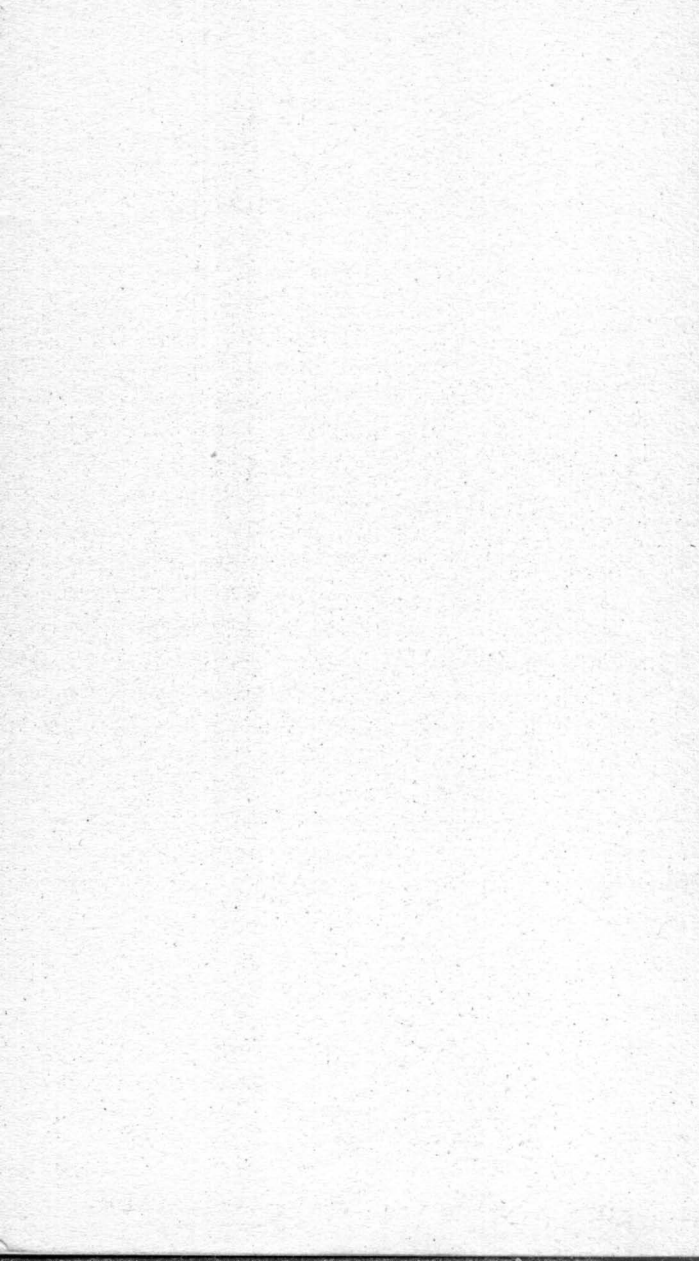
He laughed. "Go easy on my kids, hey?" She ignored him as she walked outside. Springtime had unfurled blue skies above Garron. A flock of iridescent firewings crackled overhead. The children squirmed on her shoulders, making themselves seem twice as heavy to her old bones. But Thulann had borne terrible weights over the length of her career. Seventy hard years had deposited her in this place at

this moment and she had no complaints. Wriggling children and brisk Garron winds were a happy load. They were precisely the burden she had always wanted to bear.

With white hair braided and no sword at her back, the old Jukan woman hefted her load and ambled into the spring-time and the life that she could, at long last, begin to live.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A second generation writer and SF fan, Austen Andrews spends his daylight hours as a computer programmer in Austin, Texas. At night he transforms into an author, cartoonist, and father. He dreams in the colors of horror, fantasy and mad, unbridled science.

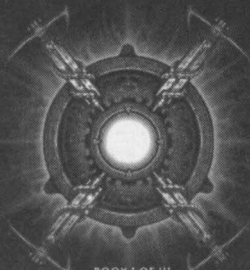


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